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Isolation

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"In Ireland they take their pleasures sadly"

—*Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill*

She chose the other not long
before they fell off
the Circular Road going home.
In a ditch they fell laughing
after that long pub crawl.
They couldn't see the way, and they
fell down, the dirt was beaded and crumbled
and they slid down in a heap,
one on the other which was
precipitous and propitious
both at the same time. He thought this
later when he could think at all.
He had seen them lying just so.
Her breast flat, his groin full.
He had seen them behind his green eyes
long before the lights flashed
and the barman screamed, "Times up. Times up.
Ladies and Gents. Have you no homes to go to?
Have you no homes? Times up."
And it was sad but true, that he hadn't
if he answered, he would
have said, no, as a matter of fact.
He had seen them so, lying down one
on the other, but he had expected
a bed not this ditch on the road
halfway home and the wind somehow
finding the bottom but he was
drunk with whiskey and the thought of sex,
and glad that the former didn't
cancel out the latter. And as
she was thinking, "yes" wasn't she though,
he saw her squinting into
a black, starless sky and weighing
the outcome and he elbowed her
in the breast because he was clumsy,
and she screamed. "Oh, you." and he said, "Yes."
And her breath was sweet on his lips

and their breaths were sweet on their lips
though sour behind. They kissed. Hot breath
on her throat, she imagined insects
in her hair, in her ears. And she didn't
think much more. And the earth had settled,
the grass swayed above, and she was glad
it hadn't rained. It wasn't insects
but the tip of his tongue in her ear
and his hands fumbld so and so
with the buttons and the snaps
until she laughed. Fool. Let me do it.
And the tweed of his jacket underneath
her bare, itched. Soon she, he,
stopped complaining, too intent and settled
into it. They continued into it
as they had month in and month out,
not too many months though he loved her
and loved her, there was no one like her
and he was younger, but had more money,
and wouldn't that work out all right.
From ditch back to bedsit in county Kerry,
Galway, Cork, he loved her in every
county so that she could hardly breathe.
She said, "Ah, I'm one of many.
He'll get over me." before she left,
but she knew she lied. She had her plans.
It was not the ditch that did him in,
or his hot tongue, or his heart
that outdistanced her by miles
and years, or the years between them,
or the money but a prosaic
other man, seen in the corner
of his eye, a hanger-on.
He closed his eyes to all, the more
his love was not returned, the more
he sent it out like a man who tries
for sweepstakes, contests, a free
trip to the Virgin Islands.
He was sure his luck would change,
and she would add love to passion.
When she was two days from leaving him,

he had already gone through
courtship, bought the ring, took her
to the parish priest,
visited his parents,
all in his imagination.
The ditch was her farewell.
He didn't know it as he brushed her off,
shook her coat and smiled.
She was pregnant by the other
man all the while.
And he unfamiliar with
her cycles asked;
is it safe for us?
"Ah, you needn't worry,"
she had said.

—*Nancy O'Donnell*

Spanish Armor

The ghost appeared for the first time two nights after Rosa came home with her roots and leaves in the warped bronze helmet and one night after she carried her purple flowering vines home in the tarnished, dirt-encrusted breastplate. It appeared in the full armor of a 16th century Spanish soldier, glowing with a watery blue light, a mournful look in the dark eyes over the drooping mustache. Rosa's brother, George, gave a strangled cry when it stepped through the front door, and he leaped out a window into the street. Asleep in her room, Rosa dreamed of sea monsters: monolithic serpents that wrapped her in icy coils and pulled her beneath dark, silent waters.

When George limped home for breakfast, he told Rosa about the apparition. His sister, who had not spoken in twenty years, said nothing; she showed no surprise or sign of comprehension, which added to George's belief that she had grown simple. Intent on watering a houseful of herbs and flowers, Rosa sidestepped George's frustrated dramatics.

Rosa had spoken less and less during the years of mourning that followed their parents' deaths. She had become increasingly shadowlike and remained locked away even after George returned to his drinking and women. Occasionally someone from town saw her on her knees digging in the weeds by the cliffs or in the woods. Rosa gathered tiny "star-of-the-morning" flowers, the elusive "up-the-creek-down-the-marsh" plant, "dead man's hand roots, "happy-hour" flowers, and countless other mysterious herbs known only to herself. She gathered, cleaned, hung, dried, chopped, mixed and gradually she sold them to the women of the town. Her solitude more than her skill brought them to her back door. "You know secret things," said the first woman who came with a private disease. Rosa smiled and gave her a mixture of herbs that would have seasoned a stew to culinary perfection. A month later a woman came with the details of her husband's impotence. Rosa packaged the dried petals of a passion flower with a tiny shrug. In the following years Rosa treated thirty-two love disorders, twelve cases of whooping cough, six insomnia complaints, ten fevers. She fixed thirty love potions, twenty draughts for broken hearts, and one potion of male discouragement for a beleaguered beauty.

Twenty years of muteness began when one woman explained gravely that her son had had a prophetic dream that his mother would one day grow the head of a cow, and did Rosa have an herb to prevent this sad event? Rosa stood speechless, her lips twitching; when the woman had gone, she found that she had no words left within her. After that, a light appeared around her head and the plants she hung to dry took root in the ceiling and blossomed. The shyest herbs sprang into her hands as she crawled in ditches. The rare "hundred year"

flower bloomed in her palm. The women of the town never noticed the change, but when she was thirty they spoke of her as though she were sixty.

The ghost provoked no reaction in Rosa aside from philosophical acceptance of its presence. Not content to appear only at night, it paced from room to room in mid-morning and late afternoon, an unwavering melancholy in its eyes and a ponderous, mechanical quality to its movements. It made no sound, but it left wet footprints in the yellow pollen that fell from the ceiling flowers. As Rosa swept them away she smelled salt water through the thick perfume of herbs. George, who was never reconciled to the ghost and considered it wonderful incentive for all-night parties elsewhere, noticed a certain regularity to the tracks. Before Rosa erased them one day he followed them from a wall of plants in the sitting room around the dining room table, through the kitchen, past the bathroom, and into Rosa's room, where they ran up to the wall of plants on the left side. He had almost decided the shade was as mad about weeds as his sister when his eye fell on the warped breastplate. Retracing the ghostly steps, he found the battered casque in the sitting room, full of purple flowers. "Rosa!" he hollered. But when he explained and re-explained the haunting and danced about mimicking the ghost with gloom and doom on his face, she either would not or could not understand, or she had understood long before and did not care. When he tried to take away the armor she took it away from him and put it back on the shelves, where it remained at the ends of the ghost's path. George told his friends the problem over their mugs that evening and his storytelling bought him free drinks and a place to sleep for several nights.

Alone in her silence, Rosa re-arranged the furniture. The ghostly tracks were rerouted accordingly, but the endpoints were constant. Absorbed in sweeping one evening, Rosa backed into the ghost. After that she moved the breastplate into the sitting room and cleaned both it and the casque. She refilled them with purple flowering vines, which the ghost spent hours contemplating, standing motionless, moist, blue. When Rosa reached around it to water them, it seemed to notice her for the first time, and the empty eyes left the armor and flowers and followed her about the house. In the late shadows sometimes Rosa sat with it, glowing faintly herself, muffled in her own silence.

One morning Rosa awoke to find a disheveled man cowering in the dining room at the ghost's feet. His name was Evan; he had sprained his shoulder in a fall from the plate cabinet. Rosa led him to George's room, where she applied hot poultices to his swollen, trembling shoulder. When he tried to escape she clung to his good arm, glaring at the ghost and smiling at Evan. "Alright, alright," Evan said finally, and giving the ghost a wide berth, went back to George's room for more treatment.

Rosa had not seen a man other than George in years, and she now felt her heart expand painfully. She was almost overcome by the force of feeling in her body. Her aura wavered and disappeared. Confused, she threw herself into

housecleaning and poultice-making. Rather than crawl in ditches for tiny roots, she ventured into town to buy meat for her guest. She left a murmuring wake when she retreated behind her door again to spend a day cooking chickens. When Evan finished the dry, singed meat smothered in mint sauce, she fell in love with him. The fact that he had not explained his presence there nor said more than twenty words to her meant nothing; she was obsessed with his black eyes, his thin, strong hands, his maleness that filled the house like a voice humming at an unbearable pitch. She found the idea of applying the thirteenth hot poultice to his bare shoulder agonizing, and she curled up, immobile, on her bed.

A willing prisoner in the house of motionless leaves, intriguing scents, and shadowy silence, Evan was not unaware of his effect on Rosa. He had heard town stories about her, and he was surprised to find her half as old as he expected and twice as human. He watched her with a secret hunger and knew her every movement in the house and yard. He became confident as Rosa became flustered. When Rosa went out for meat, the hunger in him erupted in a strange, feverish manner. The ghost watched forlornly as he rifled through her drawers, peered under cabinets, overturned pots and scrambled madly in dirt and leaves. Rosa's distraction was so great that she never noticed the "frog's feet" beside the ant lilies on the wrong shelf or the dirt on the floor when she returned. Evan became confident to extremes and stepped cockily through the Spanish ghost when it was in his way. Taken aback, the ghost retreated to the shadows and stood there like a decorative blue suit of armor, through which flower petals fell on their way to the floor.

On the morning Rosa didn't come with the poultice, Evan came smiling into her bedroom. He bared his shoulders and then his chest and back and then his legs and finally the swelling bulge between his thighs. Rosa realized it even as he said it: "Now you're my prisoner," and with one thrust he pinned her wriggling to the pollen-covered sheets. At the height of his passion, she screamed soundlessly.

He began speaking to her afterward. He told her she was beautiful, that he was falling in love with her, and that he didn't want anymore poultices. Rosa gave up watering the rows and rows of herbs; she let petals and leaves accumulate on the floor and tables. Evan hung a hat from the ghost's helm so that it covered the blasted eyes and they made languid love in the debris.

When Rosa began thinking in the words he fed her, she decided that when Evan proposed to her she would say "yes." It was a monumental decision simply made. Marriage to Rosa meant a life like those of the women who came to her door with sick children and nightmares. Previously mundane and even ridiculous, marriage suddenly became imperative. The years of silence were sterile and bitterly lonely in retrospect. Rosa waited blissfully for the question that she knew was burning in Evan.

When he was sure that she was his: "About the armor and the ghost," he said

from their bed of leaves at the ghost's feet. "In town they say you found Spanish treasure. Can I see it sometime?"

The last few petals floated, without sound, to the floor.

—*Lynn Cherny*

House Play

Sitting in the bathroom
On a chair
In the kind of house that
Could find a chair in its bathroom

I hear you shout
Through a curtain that
Loses just enough
You to make me smile
(Which isn't that much)

How truly you hate
This "scary old house"
Which reminds me
That I have never lived
In a house, any kind at all

And that I should really be thinking
About what we are doing
In a house
Of the kind that could have
A chair in its bathroom

Instead of gently falling
For the thing muddled by the curtain
And quite naturally
Wanting some brandy, in some crazy glass
Or to call you something truly silly

Like darling.

—Paul Elliott

first dive

i perch
on cement slab
eyes shielded with open palm
you tread
feet and hands
in motion
running out of
your element
coax

i leap
cowering through
vacancy
we sink together
your beard bristles
into my neck

i breathe

—*Melanie Coates*

The Money Tree

Casper Anastasious Llewellyn rubbed the smooth, dark earth between his fingers proudly. The land had only been fit for weeds when he bought the small, neat, frame house some forty years ago. Now the earth was so rich he could raise anything — and he had. Flowers and ferns and plants and evergreens, the loveliest backyard in the entire neighborhood.

It was a typical English-styled garden: an entrance arc formed from a leafy fern, meticulously trimmed privet hedges surrounding the yard and the house, a dense background of birch, beech, white pine and ash that created a pleasant contrast no matter the time of year. Azaleas and rhododendrum vied with each other in abundance and brilliance of color along a walk lined with butterfly shrub, purple barberry and false indigo. Evergreen shrubs and tall crown imperial created a background for blooming hyacinths and daffodils. There were yellow chrysanthemum, pink phlox, larkspur, irish juniper and bush honeysuckle — enough to set the courtyard ablaze with color three seasons out of the year.

He was always happiest in The Garden. To him, it was an immensely wonderful place where he was in charge and at peace and where nothing else in the world mattered.

They were Special. Every bush, every shrub, every bending blade of grass; they were his children.

When he was nineteen, a beautiful girl came to work at his father's tiny grocery shop. She was young and wise with smooth tawny skin and the whitest teeth Casper had ever seen. He made secret plans to marry her as soon as he could save enough money.

That was in 1930. The survival of many families in Casper's neighborhood depended upon whatever pennies they could earn to feed themselves. Most had lost their jobs and their homes. Casper's father was a man given to generosity. He could not bear to sit and watch as his friends and neighbors went without food. He extended credit to them freely and never hesitated to provide necessary items for those in need. One day, some men with important-looking papers and a truck arrived at the store and took away everything they owned except for the clothes they were wearing and his mother's wedding rings. Soon after, his father died and the wedding rings disappeared to pay for his burial.

Casper's mother began to act differently. The boisterous, easy-going woman he had known now seldom spoke. She spent her days in a secret, solitary world; sitting quietly and motionless. She peered from the window of the apartment where they now lived.

Casper earned money wherever he could, doing odd jobs such as cleaning

horse stables for the police department, delivering milk, and painting houses. He earned a good deal of money as a gardener for an upper-class family whose lives had been unaffected by the economic depression. Once they asked Casper to be their regular gardener. They would pay him good wages and provide him with a place to live. Casper refused. He had his mother to take care of. Besides, the Depression couldn't last forever. One day, when things got better, he would have a small shop like the one his father once owned.

Things did get better. Casper saved enough money to lease a small two-story building on the same street where his father's store once stood. He opened a small market, selling everything from his own freshly grown vegetables to the latest arthritis remedy. On the second floor, he rented out rooms. Soon he had enough money to move himself and his mother to a new home. He was thankful to get away from the noisy, crowded building with its trash-lined hallways and strange faces that spoke strange languages to scare away the "crawly" things that invaded their pantry at night to eat their food. Casper thought their new home might help his mother to get better, but sadly, she remained the same.

Mother lived to be ninety-two. Doc said she was healthy but her old heart just decided to take a rest. Except for The Garden, Casper was alone.

He knelt into the soft earth. In his left hand he clutched a bunch of tiny seeds. The smell of the earth swelled in his nostrils and filled his being with tingly exhilaration.

"This would be the perfect spot for petunias," he thought out loud.

"Uh...Mr. Llewellyn?"

The small voice startled Casper out of his reverie. It was Joachim, his newspaper boy. He was about fourteen years old, tall and gangly with a swarthy complexion and a shock of inky, black hair.

"I come to collect for . . ."

"I know what you're here to collect for. There used to be a time when folks knocked before they walked into somebody's backyard. But I'll bet they don't teach that kinda thing in school anymore, ay?"

Joachim smiled feebly as Casper slowly pulled himself up from the ground. The dampness of the earth caused the legs of his khaki trousers to stick to his knees. He reached deep into his pocket, drew out a large handful of silver and counted some coins into Joachim's hand.

"You owe another twenty cents Mr. Llewellyn, remember?"

"I'm aware of how much a newspaper costs. I've deducted twenty cents for the two days last week when it rained and my newspaper was a soaking, sopping unreadable mess."

Joachim scratched his head and trailed off, making notations into his tiny, blue notebook.

Casper shook his head at the boy's insolence. He dropped the leftover change into the breast pocket of his green plaid shirt.

"Children just don't have respect for grown people anymore, no respect at all."

He bent over and picked up the pair of pruning shears that he had jammed, blade first, into a patch of soft dirt. As he leaned over, some coins fell out of his shirt pocket, onto the ground and into the holes that the pruning shear blades had left. Casper picked up a dirt covered nickel. He put his fingers into the holes, fishing for the rest of the coins, but they only sunk deeper into the earth, as if trying to hide from him. Casper brushed away some of the dirt, but the coins were no where to be seen. He was becoming impatient. It was late and soon it would be too dark to finish his work.

"Maybe I'll just leave them there," he said as he knelt closer, patting and smoothing the mound of earth. "Who knows, maybe I'll grow my own money tree." He chuckled aloud at that bit of whimsy.

"Talkin' to yerself again, ol' buddy?"

Casper shuddered as he came to recognize the raucous voice behing him.

"You ain't goin' senile on me, are ya?"

It was Dokie Schnott who lived next door. He was a loudmouth, a braggart and the neighborhood "know-it-all".

Dokie was about five-foot-five inches tall, but he weighed over 200 pounds. He had short, greasy hair, teeth stained brown from smoking and a huge belly that lopped over his pant belt. He wore brown polyester slacks and a green shirt two sizes too small. More often than usual, at least one or more buttons would be missing, exposing a hairy navel to the world. He flicked the butt of his cigar into a patch of petunias. "If you don't mind," Casper said sharply, getting up to retrieve the still smoldering butt.

"Sorry about that ol' man. Hey. Try'da guess how much money I made today. G'wan, try'da guess."

"Look, I really don't know and frankly . . ."

"Just take a look." He shifted a freshly lit cigar to his other hand and fished into his back pocket for his wallet. Dokie was a swimming pool salesman and loved to brag about how great business was and how much money he made.

"Look at that," he said proudly waving a handful of bills. "I got over 300 clams here. It ain't even season yet. Just wait'll next month."

"That's wonderful Dokie, but I really have a lot to do right now."

"Sure ol' man. I kin take a hint. I know how yuz likes to be alone with yer weeds and things, heh heh. I could have a setup like this too if I had the time. But businessmen don't have time for this kinda stuff. We hire other people to do it for us. Hey, maybe one a' these days you'll be workin' for me, heh heh."

"Heaven forbid." Casper began to walk away, leaving Dokie puffing intently on his cigar. "I'll talk to you some other time."

"Wait up. I been meanin' ta tell ya how sorry I was to hear that your ol' lady kicked off. She leave ya anything?"

"Goodbye Dokie!"

"See ya."

Dokie left, leaving a trail of cigar smoke. Casper sighed in exasperation.

Evening had settled and it was too dark to continue work. He began to gather his tools.

It was April. The frequent rain showers, warm sun and moist air transformed The Garden into a dominion of lush greenery. But along with the jonquils, bluebells and phlox, new weeds had also poked their heads through the earth. Casper worked extra hard to eliminate these intruders.

One day, he noticed a peculiar-looking bush growing in an empty patch where a young azalea had struggled but died last fall. The tall, healthy stalk, with delicate green leaves didn't resemble anything that Casper had ever seen before. He stood over the seedling, spade in hand, wondering whether he should dig it up immediately. His curiosity won out, however, and the strange, orphan bush remained.

A few weeks later Casper noticed that the small plant had grown rather rapidly, with lush, shiny leaves and sturdy branches. Suddenly he thought back to the day he had planted those coins.

"Perhaps the decomposing coins have stimulated some dormant seeds of some kind," he reasoned to himself.

The small bush was an eyesore. It had no place among the exquisite beauty of The Garden. It had to go, but maybe later. Casper had yards of hedges to trim and a field of grass that needed feeding and watering. Besides, his supplies were running low and he needed to do some shopping. He would get rid of the orphan later.

Soon summer arrived. Casper, busy with bugs and begonias, and more than a little curious, allowed the strange bush to stay in The Garden. He was just about convinced, however, that it was probably some kind of weed.

One day he grabbed a small pitchfork and loosened the dirt around the base of the stalk. He was surprised to see how deeply rooted the plant had become. He grabbed it and pulled with all his strength, but the bush remained firmly planted, albeit a little cockeyed from Casper's efforts. Casper scratched his head in irritation, his forehead moist with sweat.

"There's always more than one way to skin a cat," he decided.

For the next few days, Casper poured a powerful weed killer on the plant, expecting to see it wither and die. It only grew taller. Casper began to realize that this was no plant, it was a tree.

Summer became fall and Casper's garden became an artist's palette of color. He noticed that of all the trees in The Garden, the orphan was by far the most beautiful, with its leaves of saffron and wine. The orphan tree was now almost as tall as Casper, almost six feet.

Winter was unusually mild. Casper had to shovel his walk of snow only once, in February when the temperature dropped and it snowed for two days. Almost as soon as February disappeared, the weather became pleasant with warmish days and clear, chilly nights. Casper began to spend more and more time in The Garden.

The orphan tree was the first to sprout tiny, new leaves on its slender branches, along with a rather grand display of delicate yellow flowerettes.

Soon, small olive pods appeared. They grew rapidly, elongated in shape and began to resemble overgrown lima beans. They were lacking in aesthetic quality but were at least mostly hidden by the myriad yellow flowers.

The peculiarity of the tree intrigued Casper. He would never chop it down now, and one day, he decided to plant a ring of marigolds around its base, finally welcoming its presence in The Garden. As he knelt, loosening the earth with a spade, one of the heavy pods fell to the ground with a thud. Casper picked it up. It was indeed weighty and seemed to contain some kind of large, flat seed. He took out his pen knife and slit it open, gasping in astonishment as three large gold pieces fell from the opened pod onto the ground in front of him. He ogled at the coins, unable to move.

Finally he reached for one of the pieces, his hands shaking slightly. It looked real. It felt real. He tried to bend it but couldn't. "Maybe Dokie was right. Maybe I am going senile." He bit his knuckles, trying to make sure he wasn't lost in some crazy dream.

He stood up and gazed at the tree. It had hundreds of pods just like the one that fell off. Could it be they were all filled with gold?

"Maybe I am senile, or dreaming," he chuckled, "but until somebody wakes me up . . ."

He half ran to his tool shed and found a large wicker basket filled with rusted nails and bits and pieces of this and that. He emptied the odds and ends onto the floor and hurried back outside.

"Ladder. I'll need a ladder," he mumbled, running back to the toolshed. His old stepladder was old and rickety, but it would have to do.

Casper worked quickly and excitedly. He was like a young boy on Christmas morning trying to open all of his presents at once. He pulled the pods off their branches, stripped out the gold and let the empty olive-colored seed cases fall to the ground.

Evening approached quickly. The sun began to set and the sky became a blanket of cobalt blue, streaked with wisps of crimson clouds.

Casper had forgotten all about the meal of yams and spring lamb that he had planned to have for dinner.

The basket was almost full of the glistening gold pieces, so heavy that he had to drag it into the house by its handle since it was much too heavy to lift and carry. He was very tired by this time and went to bed without eating a thing. He woke Monday morning, groggy from a fitful night's sleep. He dressed quickly and stuffed a piece of toast into his mouth, washing it down with a glass of orange juice. The gold was still where he had left it in the living room, disguised as a basket of old magazines. Outside, he gazed at The Money Tree. There were still many pods hanging from its branches, partially hidden among the large, shiny leaves and the countless yellow flowers. He had trimmed his hedges high

that year so that passersby on the street could not see into the yard. The Money Tree would be safe. He showered and changed into his blue suit.

Casper's heart pounded as he entered Furman & Sons, Jewelers and Appraisers. Perhaps they would laugh at him and tell him the gold pieces were worthless. Maybe they would only be worth a few pennies. Suppose they called the police? Casper waited until all the other customers had left the store before he approached Mr. Furman.

"What can I help you with?" Mr. Furman asked, peering at Casper over the rim of his glasses.

Casper suddenly found that he couldn't speak. He opened his mouth but no words came out. Mr. Furman eyed him suspiciously. Quickly, Casper took out a piece of cloth from his coat pocket and unwrapped it, revealing the shining piece of gold. Mr. Furman's eyes lit up instantly. He fingered the coin, turning it over and over and holding it towards the light for a better look.

"Pure gold . . . I haven't seen anything like this in years. Where did you get it?"

"I . . . I . . . My mother passed recently. I was going through her things. She saved everything. I came across these . . . er, this. I wanted to see if they . . . it, it was, well, how much it was worth. My father was a wealthy man before the Depression, I had no idea she . . ."

Casper felt his face redden. He wondered if Furman could tell he was not telling the truth. Furman rubbed his chin and stared at the gold piece, not paying much attention to Casper at all.

"If all the pieces are in this fine condition, you stand to make yourself a good deal of money, Mr. . . .?"

"Mr. Llwelllyn."

Furman opened a pad and began to make notations.

"You can bring these to any bank and they'll pay you for them. Naturally they must deduct fees for processing and taxes and tariffs. You'd have to fill out a lot of papers with a lot of questions and so on. On the other hand, if you do business with me you stand to make a nice piece of change, no questions asked."

"How much money is involved here?"

Furman turned the notebook around for Casper to see what he had written. Casper felt his mouth go dry but he kept his face expressionless. He wrapped the coin in the cloth once again and started for the door.

"I think we can do business, Mr. Furman."

"Wonderful, now why don't you leave me your number and . . ."

"Don't worry, I'll call you."

Furman was true to his word. The gold pieces furnished Casper with more money than he thought he'd ever see at one time. He opened a bank account and quickly paid off debts that had haunted him for years.

The next few months were the happiest, busiest and most exciting of Casper's

whole life. He spent a week clearing his house of all the things that should have been thrown away years ago. From his closet came the dowdy, old suits that didn't fit any longer, the faded white uniforms he wore as a milkman, pairs of worn shoes and moth-eaten coats.

In their place he bought a grey herringbone tweed sports coat, a vested, worsted wool suit and a cashmere top coat. He also chose knit shirts, twill slacks and an argyle sweater.

Next he hired a young woman named Rosetta who was a dressmaker and artist. She also had a good eye for picking and matching colors and could sew draperies. Together they removed the faded curtains, the threadbare carpet and battered sofa. Casper repainted the living room and bought new appliances for the kitchen.

Dokie Schnott observed these events with unparalleled amazement. He stood transfixed as the men came to deliver Casper's new carpet and furniture.

Casper took a vacation. The first one he ever had. He travelled to the Caribbean Islands to fish and bask in the sunshine. He slept, read and feasted on platters of fresh, broiled seafood. Soon he returned home, relaxed and rejuvenated, his bronze skin gleaming with health.

"It's about time I got rid of this old bomb," he thought to himself as he slammed the door of his sixteen-year-old station wagon.

As he turned, he saw Dokie Schnott, mowing his lawn and puffing furiously on a cigar. He saw Casper, dropped the lawn mower to the ground, and hurried towards him.

"Howya doin' ol man?" Dokie panted, flicking away ashes of his cigar.

Casper pulled out a large pullman suitcase with one hand and a straw bag of souvenirs with the other.

"Here, lemme help you with that."

Dokie grabbed the bag and followed Casper towards the house.

"I see ya been on a little vacation."

"That's right."

Casper sensed a strange agitation in Dokie's voice. He seemed disturbed and restless.

"Ya know, I been meanin' ta talk to ya."

"Oh really? About what, Dokie?"

"About you. I been noticin' what you been doin' aroun' here, you know, the furniture, the new fridge. Yer settin' yerself up real nice. What gives?"

"What in the world are you talking about, Dokie?"

"You know what I mean. Where'ya gettin the bread? Yer ol' lady leave ya a bundle or sumthin?"

"You've got a lot of nerve asking a question like that. Frankly, I don't think it's any of your business."

Dokie licked his lips excitedly.

"Aw c'mon, one businessman to another. Somebody give ya a hot tip?"

"Goodbye, Dokie."

Casper took the bag from Dokie, went inside and closed the door behind him.

"You're holdin' out on me!" Dokie yelled through the closed door. "You ain't gettin' away with it. Nobody puts one over on Dokie Schnott!"

Dokie's belligerent attitude made Casper feel ill at ease. Dokie was a man who prided himself on having more than everybody else. He constantly flaunted his supposed wealth with expensive watches and a new car every year. Now he was being upstaged by an old man living on a pension. Still, Casper couldn't see any particular reason to worry. Dokie would never be able to figure out that the source of Casper's wealth was growing just yards away from his own backyard.

Casper considered his good fortune a blessing, but at times a bit wearisome. There was a time when mail arrived, he'd receive a few bills, a magazine and something addressed to "occupant". Now his mailbox was always crammed with everything from life insurance packages to investment opportunities. There were catalogues for boating equipment, clothing, household decor and sporting goods.

The phone calls were even more of an annoyance. On at least five occasions, Casper found himself scurrying from his bath to answer a ringing phone, only have a salesperson on the other end throw him a pitch for yet another product or service.

Occasionally, people showed up at his door. Most were amiable, ambitious young people trying to make a living for themselves. The problem was, the items they tried to sell were more often outrageously expensive or of no use at all to Casper.

It felt wonderful to be man of means, but it seemed, at least to Casper, that life used to me a lot more peaceful.

On Sunday, Casper once again turned his attention to The Garden. It had suffered greatly as Casper, busy with other things had shied away from his usual routine. There were weeds to be pulled, soil to be fertilized and his tools needed cleaning and oiling. Casper, donned in navy blue trousers and a white knit shirt, spent most of the day weeding and pruning his flower bed. The early September sun was warm on his back and perspiration trickled from his scalp into his eyes, but the work was exhilarating and he didn't take notice of anything else around him. Truly, he didn't sense the pair of eyes peering at him from a window two stories above — a pair of eyes that belonged to Dokie Schnott.

Casper had several things planned for that Monday. But he wanted to finish his work in The Garden before beginning anything else. In the kitchen, he prepared coffee and a bowl of fruit and cereal. He tossed two slices of bread into the toaster. The early morning sun sent rays of light through the window. Casper picked up a knife and began to butter the toast when he thought he saw

a figure moving in his backyard. He yanked open the curtains, he eyes widening in disbelief. He dropped the knife to the floor, sending a dollop of margarine splattering against the cabinet. It was Dokie Schnott, perched precariously on the ladder propped against The Money Tree. Casper raced to the kitchen door. Quickly, he slipped into the heavy work boots he usually kept by the coat rack. He darted through the door and outside. Dokie didn't notice him at first, but when he did, it was as if he couldn't figure out which way to turn. Suddenly, the timeworn old ladder began to give way under the punishment of Dokie's two-hundred plus poundage. The first step cracked and split, then the second, sending Dokie sliding down a wood frame and receiving a hand full of splinters. In his other hand he grasped a pod from The Money Tree.

Casper marched into the kitchen furious. His toast was cold and his cereal mushy. It was just as well because his appetite had been good and spoiled.

"The nerve of that guy," he muttered, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

Dokie's cousin Sid was only a security guard, but Casper began to wonder if together they could really make trouble for him.

"What to do, what to do?" Casper pondered, sipping the coffee without tasting it.

Later that day, Casper returned to The Garden. Naturally, his first order of business was to remove the last of the gold-filled pods from the tree. He put the gold in a small lock-box and burned the seed cases along with a pile of leaves he had raked together.

Dokie Schnott and his cousin Sidney Poote sat in the office of Ransom Updike, sole reporter and editor of *The Weekly Blade*, a small local newspaper of mostly ads, with an even smaller circulation.

Updike was a large man with a scraggly untrimmed beard, hair that needed washing, a pendulous stomach and an ever-present cigarette. Updike inhaled deeply, blowing smoke through his nostrils.

"You guys want me to believe that Llewellyn's growing money in his own backyard?"

"It's true," Sidney interjected, "tell'um what you told me Dokie."

"It's like this. This ol' guy lives all by himself, ya see. Then allofasudden it's like he's got money ta burn. New car, new clothes, vacations to the islands . . . It don't figure. So I starts doin a little investigatin on my own. I start watchin him like a hawk and seen him spendin alotta time with this weird lookin tree in his garden. He's one of those garden freaks, spends a whole day diggin up weeds and talkin to himself. Anyhow I decides ta get a better look and when I do he nabs me an slaps me aroun an throws me out like I was tryin to touch the crown jewel or somethin."

"So he got real mad when he saw you bothering the tree?"

"Yeah, it's like I said. He try'da kill me. He said he'd shoot me if I ever set foot over there again."

Updike turned to Sidney.

"Did you witness this?"

"No. I went over there a coupla times after it happened. The guy's got these six foot hedges that ya can't see through an theres a lock on the gate, but it's like my cousin says. He lives pretty high one the hog for a retired guy."

Udike rubbed his eyes.

"Well it's only Thursday. The paper comes out on Monday. The whole thing sounds pretty hokey to me. Tell ya what. I'll do some snooping around on my own. If he won't talk to me or looks like he's trying to hide something, I'll do a little piece on him . . . purely made up stuff of course, but enough to get people nosing around. If he's into anything we'll soon find out."

That morning, Casper peered out of his window to glimpse a peculiar sight. As if on cue, all of the leaves of The Money Tree had fallen from their branches. Not a single one remained. A circular carpet of gold and burgundy leaves surrounded the tree.

The Money Tree looked especially frail. It's trunk was covered with a layer of moldy white powder and an army of red ants seemed to have taken up residence within the bark.

It was Saturday. Dokie Schnott's phone rang.

"Schnott, this is Udike. Something's definitely going on there. I can't put my finger on it, and the guy never returned any of my calls so I made some inquiries. The guy gets about five a month pension, yet he just bought a brand new car and paid cash. I'm putting the paper to bed and Llewellyn's in it."

Casper did everything he could do to save The Money Tree. He watered it, spread special fertilizers, fumigated to get rid of the hordes of unrelenting ants, but nothing seemed to make a difference. The Money Tree was dying, fading out faster than anything else Casper had ever witnessed.

It was Monday morning. Casper had all but forgotten about Dokie's threats, reasoning that he could never prove anything anyway. He ate a light breakfast and headed outside to complete a task.

With a few quick shoves, Casper uprooted the now dead Money Tree and pushed it into the ground. He thought back to the day when he had tried to pull up the young seedling but couldn't. Next he sharpened his ax and cut the trunk of the tree into kindling, stuffing the blighted branches and twigs into plastic garbage bags. He stopped to rest and look at his work. The Money Tree was gone. There probably would not be another.

Later he decided to take an afternoon nap. Just as he drifted off to sleep the telephone rang. He had forgotten to turn his answering machine on. He hoped it wasn't that Udike person again, probably trying to sell him something. It was Dokie.

"Hey, didya see the paper? You're in it boy, take a look!"

"What paper? What are you talking about?"

"Get yerself a copy of *The Weekly*, Page 6. I told you no one pulls one on ol' Dokie Schnott."

Dokie hung up.

Casper sat up, trying to make sense of Dokie's rambling. *The Weekly*? What about *The Weekly*? Slowly things came back. He thought about Dokie in The Garden. He had promised to get even, he said something about an article in *The Weekly*. Casper put on his socks and shoes. The *Weekly* was a free paper and it wasn't unusual to see piles of them stacked near the mailboxes or other places. Casper only had to walk one block before he found a copy someone had discarded on a bench. Some of the pages were missing, but page six was still intact. Casper read on:

"Casper A. Llewellyn, avid gardener, and resident of this town for over forty years appears to have stumbled upon a gardener's dream. The 69 year-old retiree has his own money tree growing in his backyard. He enjoys vacations, expensive clothes and new cars with the earnings from his tree. Llewellyn, who couldn't be reached for comment, barricades his garden with six-foot high hedges and a locked, iron fence."

Casper was too stunned to finish the article.

"The average person would never believe such nonsense," he reasoned. "Leave it to *The Weekly* to print such a silly story."

Casper wasn't completely correct. Lots of people did believe it. His phone was ringing as he entered the house. He quickly disconnected it. He watched as people walked by the house attempting to peer into the backyard. Cars pulled up, slowed down in front of his house, then pulled off again. In all, it was a miserable afternoon.

Things seemed to calm down by evening. Casper took a hot bath and changed into his pajamas and robe. The sound of someone pounding on his front door startled him.

He looked through his bedroom window. A white van was parked in front of the house. Three men stood at the door, one with some kind of camera equipment perched on his shoulder. Casper stood motionless, ignoring their knocks, hoping they would leave.

Soon he heard voices in the back of the house. The men were attempting to climb into his backyard. Casper ran downstairs and opened the kitchen door.

"Hey there! Get off my property! I didn't give anyone permission to . . ."

Suddenly a blinding light hit Casper's face, a light so bright he couldn't see. He heard the clicking of a camera. He tried to shade his eyes as someone perched a microphone near his mouth. There seemed to be a lot of people milling about. He heard Dokie's voice.

"It was right over here . . . no . . . there."

A handsome young man in a suit walked toward Casper.

"Are you Casper Llewellyn?"

"Yes I am, but . . ."

Casper tried to focus through the bright light.

"Are you growing currency of some sort, here in your garden?"

"Yes . . . No! I . . ."

"Do you have a money tree?"

"No . . . Yes . . . I did but it's gone . . . I . . ."

"You say you had a money tree but you cut it down?"

"No . . . I mean, it died. There was nothing I could do to save it."

In the background Dokie ranted.

"It was right there! I swear! I seen it wif my own eyes!"

The men were beginning to leave the way they came in, over the fence.

"There's no story here," one of the men said.

The young man turned to Casper.

"Thank you very much."

He took Casper's hand and shook it.

Casper turned around in time to meet eyes with Dokie.

"Hey, I'm leavin, I'm leavin. I dunno how you did it, but you sure pulled a fast one."

Casper wandered back into his house in a daze. He made himself a cup of tea and headed for the den, switching on the television and setting it at a low volume. The day had been a difficult one and Casper's temples throbbed. Slowly he began to relax and started to doze off. "I guess I've had enough excitement for today," he thought, stretching and yawning lazily, "I might as well turn in." He reached for the switch of the television set just in time to see the youngish man who was in his yard that evening. Casper quickly turned up the volume.

". . . of 73 year-old Casper Llewellyn who claimed to have grown a money tree in his backyard. The story originally appeared in today's issue of *The Weekly Blade*. Well, tonight we visited Mr. Llewellyn, and we're sorry to report that it's all a hoax." A picture of a very confused-looking Casper appeared on the screen.

Casper switched off the set.

"They couldn't even get my age right," Casper muttered disgustedly. "That Dokie, embarrassing me like that! They made me sound like I was a senile old nut. Too bad I couldn't prove that I really did have a Money Tree." He shoved his hands into his robe pockets, discovering an oddly shaped object in one.

"What in the world . . .", Casper wondered aloud, fishing out the item. From his pocket he produced a faded, brown pod, the one he had wrestled from Dokie. He had proof all along, right in his pocket. He laughed aloud.

"On the other hand," he decided, "some things are best left unsaid."

—Pamala S. Deane



Kabuki Theatre

Narvia Summers

For Princess Otahki

"One of the several hundred Cherokee Indians who died here in the delayed (by ice) crossing of the Mississippi River in the United States government forced exodus...in the severe winter of 1838-39."

Monument at
Trail of Tears Park, MO

Your trail ended here, where
buried in this hillside
you felt the years of barefoot blood
sear into this land,
break up cracks in the clay shore,
where today I cannot walk
without sinking.

I seep down to a world of salty sores
where the river pulses
with the night dances of a broken drum,
and wave after wave of your people
are crushed ashore, leaving spirits
trapped once more in the hollows of trees.

A blackbird chants. His spirit
remembers days of talking to the sun,
while trees bowed to listen
and rocks worked their dark magic.
I put my hand in his beak.
We speak
the language of ghosts,
a dark atonement tasted in earth's blood.

The river pumps out
the whiteness from my brain,
washes it dark,
while wind scrapes
a salty dance on cracked lips.

Broken,
I bend toward the hillside
and feel you whisper in me.
My arms branch out to hold you,
my feet take root, and thicken out—
rough as the bark of a tree.

—*Beth Darrow*

Woman Writing a Letter

She had to write
something to understand
what it was
she held on to
what it was
she needed
had to be said

how she had played
in piled drifts, a girl
rolling white balls
into a man, how she had hung,
in perfect alignment, his face
with rocks she'd dug up
from under the snow

how she had studied the stone
smile, long into the night
watches, following childhood
fears and fogged glass kisses,
how she had seen a shadow
move into her room, beside her
hugging her pillow
in the scary dark

how she once cherished
the orange of sherbert,
licked precariously at
their wine-hinted drips,
before they ran to puddles
in her hands, like the liquid
stuff she had used to make
her dreams of, spilled

like common salt rubbed
sore into raw flesh, like
dry ice, now she felt hot
sultry skin stiff-frozen
to her own, like frostbite
how it burned her mouth
so she could not speak
what it was

she had to reform all
the vowels, reshape
her lips, create
an alphabet of omens,
spit back the ice
and learn to talk
of snowmen, melt them
down on paper

with herself
with what it was
she had left, after
she had written
what it was
she had to
let go of

—*Valerie Russell*

Winchester

My feet grew numb
Wrapped in wet leather,
Then the painful high fence,
 the stillness around my hands —
I pulled myself over,
Stretched down into the
 rain-splashed snow
Into the wide space of your arms
And I didn't ask you
Why you woke me from my broken sleep,
Or why you left the party,
 your lover alone with mine,
The man who holds darkness
 like a seed in his hand
And loves you with it
 until you disappear,
And comes back to find you
 in the place he left you.
I didn't ask you
Where we were going
Walking through white fields.

In the numb snow
 the darkness wrapped around me
Like cold metal
Until you pulled me
Into the instep of your jacket,
 quiet as a blanket,
Squeezed too hard
Until I smiled and stumbled.

I remember the fire you built
 against the inside of a tree
On the other side of the wind,
 warm, even scalding,
Melting the snow,
 even the air around us —

Light splattered everywhere
And the ducks in the brambles
 by the creek, startled,
Slid from their glassy sleep,
Broke the silence like humming
 and the sun made its
Slow move into the sky.

And we waited,
 waiting in the full wake of things
For something bright and final and fearful,
Something turning and uncertain
 like leaves under ice,
And the fire grew so high,
 and the wind covered me,
Covered everything I owned —
 I knew then
 that I was not my body,
Could not be hurt or lifted,
 that the ice over the creek
 was narrow and limitless,
That winter
 was a song to itself
Absentminded and singing
 to its own white breath,
Its high sky,
And we walked home,
 over the log over the creek,
Up the hill and the fence
Bending around the trees,
 the wind in my face,
The silent air, the space between us,
Breathing.

—*Catherine Poulin*

In Defense of Men

Shoko, a Japanese instructor
of Oriental cooking, says, "American
men so plain. That John Lennon—he so plain.
That woman crazy to love him."
I ask if she knows Hisatoki Komaki
and his four steps to absolute peace,
including complete world disarm-
ament, prohibition of the killing
of higher animals, phasing out
accidental and even inter-
necine killing of lower animals, and eternal
happiness of spiritual beings
of the infinite universe. She says,
"What he look like. I think I know
him." I say, "He's actually quite plain."

The cooking class is very quiet.
"And besides," I say, "John Lennon is British."
"Same thing," she says, "same damn thing."

—*Renee R. Curry*

Star. I tell her if I write a chicken story, she will know I have the idea from her.

We are in my Dodge, driving out the Linden Street extension. She sits beside me, bundled and bundled in layers of outerware, her hands gloved, folded, a debutante at a social tea. Now beyond the reach of street lamps, the winter night envelops us, encouraging intimate exchanges even between us, near strangers.

She talks about her life before, in Broad Lick Spring. I promise myself I will remember every word, her story my payment for this errand. As if she senses this, she settles lower into the seat, raises her voice, and fills the car with her tale.

As she speaks, I begin to see the one-room bungalow she shares with Ozone, Trinket, and Brian. Trinket is Star's cousin and Brian's lover. It is Brian's house. It is made of scrap lumber that Brian has covered with deep green asbestos shingles and it sits far back in the pines off a secondary county road which is really little more than a gravel track.

Ozone is Brian's friend. Because he is there, Star says simply, she sleeps with him. In such cramped quarters, it keeps everybody happy.

At night the men kill the chickens. They go with other men who work for the plant. Because Star is telling the story, I picture the men as black men, black men moving about in a velvet, moonless night, like tonight, sliding through the darkness up to the chickens, wringing their necks. Has she said they wring the necks or do I bring this to the story with me?

Her job, she tells me, is to cut off the bad parts. From these they make pet food. "Don't tell me that," I say. "Has my puppy really eaten rotten chicken?"

"No, not rotten," she says. "Blue. Blue pieces." Maybe Ozone or Brian or one of the others has bruised them in the killing. Or maybe something has happened in an earlier part of the processing.

"Even if I know there ain't nothing wrong with them, I won't buy no blue chicken leg in the store, will you?"

"No," I say, "I won't."

"They come to you hanging. I do about thirty or forty a minute. I keep my knife in my hand."

Beside me, inside the gloves, her fingers are bone thin on long, delicate hands. The nails are short, neatly trimmed. Each of her knuckles is very black, very wrinkled. I am a person who notices such hands. I picture them, holding the knife, it slashing and flashing through the air. She tells me she had to work up to trimmer. Once she had been a gutter.

I ask if she has ever plucked the chickens. She laughs. In one room, they scald them with water. In another, air blasts the feathers off. "And then one machine gots rubber fingers," she says. "Chickens is high-tech."

She tells me more. She tells me she would not eat in the plant cafeteria. "You get fat you eat there," she says.

I picture long harvest tables, heaped with platters of delectable, fattening, fried chicken. "Them chemicals they feed them chickens makes the workers plump up just like the chickens theyself."

"What?" I ask, looking over at her.

A tight knit cap covers her hair. With nothing more to frame her face, it is all angular planes and eyes. "Star, you don't really believer that," I laugh.

"Yes, I do too." She nods vigorously. "See, they don't raise they own chickens. Tha's how they gets away with it. They buy the chicks. They go from one to the other and pick out so many. Then they send out they own chicken feed. The chickens stays there, but they eats that special food. It's chemicals. All them workers that eats in the cafeteria starts looking fat just like them chickens. They all gots wide, plumped out chicken breasts and hardly no ass. Brian do. And Trinket did. I mean it," she says again when I continue to laugh.

Maybe because it is two weeks until Christmas, the prison looks almost festive and inviting in the night. Arc lights wash rich yellow beams over the complex of white brick buildings, and keen-edged razor wire glints high on the fence. The night is windless, crisp and refreshing after the closeness of the car. Star stomps sturdy brogans against the asphalt and shoves her gloved hands deep inside her parka. "Is it far?" I ask. She points to a double glass doorway in the building to the far right, inside the fence. I compare the temperature to the distance. I unzip my car coat and toss it back into the car.

Star leans slightly backward as she walks. She glides her left foot out and then draws the right up to meet it. Later, on another occasion, she tells me the last time she saw her mother was from the bottom of the stairs where she had landed, dislocating her hip, when her mother threw her out. "The next thing I remembers," she says, "I am in jail and I am hurting real bad. I just spread my legs and they came out a baby."

At the prison gate, a uniformed guard steps out to meet us. He is a man as dark-skinned as Star, with a high forehead and a full mustache. "I.D.," he says. Like Star, I pull a single card from a pocket. When I work with these people, I carry only identification and loose change.

As if he is reading braille, the guard runs an index finger across my card and motions me forward. Star thumps a white card attached to a necklace of tiny steel bearings against her open palm. She grins at the card. "Jus' a minute. Tha's me. The pitcher's slipped." She rolls her thumbs across the laminate, trying to maneuver a small black and white photograph into a framing space. She twists the card, attempting to use the available light to the best advantage. The guard takes it, moves into the light for himself.

Soon he nods. "That's you all right."

Star reaches for the card. By now the guard is running his finger across it again. "Where's your birthdate?"

"It's my *work* card," Star says. "Ain't got no birthdate. I been here before."

"Not without a picture I.D. that had your birthdate. Right?"

"I lost that one. But this me, ain't it?" She grabs the card and swings the chain through the air. "This me!"

The guard ducks. "She has to have a picture I.D. with her birthdate," he says to me. "It's the rule. They'll check again inside. No one under twenty-one without a parent or guardian."

"I'm thirty-three," Star says. "Look at me! Now, ain't I thirty-three?"

"Well, she's with me," I say, wildly hoping this will somehow clear up the whole matter.

"I am a indigent," Star shouts.

Both the guard and I star at her.

"I'm a indigent, and I ain't got no other way to get here." She puts a gloved hand on the guard's blue-black sleeve. "J.B. he been jail three months and I ain't seen him but once when he first gots in."

"I called today," I say. "The lady I talked to only said a picture I.D. Even if I could get to the city and back before visiting hours end, she's told you, she has no other I.D."

The guard shakes his head. "I understand," he says, "but it's the rules. They check again inside and it'd be my neck."

Star moves up closer to him. "C'mon now," she croons, "C'mon now." She slides her tongue through her lips, wetting them.

In a quick movement, I wrap my arm around her. "Sir, isn't there anyone we can speak to?" To Star, I say, "Let's see what we can do. This gentleman understands."

"I know he do, Sharon. It's rules," she says to the guard.

From his belt, he unhitches his radio. "Let me see if I can talk to the lieutenant."

I am shivering and I have my arms strapped tightly across my body, I will not risk a trip to the car.

As we wait, several other visitors appear. A white woman in a dirty blue polyester pants suit and cheap green scuffs is followed by a boy about five years old. The boy wears a nylon windbreaker and run-down cowboy boots. On his left shoulder is a bulging diaper bag which he constantly hitches up. His right hand grips a sniveling toddler in a fuzzy brown sweater and corduroy overalls. The guard has introduced himself. His name is Johnson. He checks the woman's card and pats the boy on the head. I peer at Star and say to her for the second time, "Let me talk to the lieutenant, okay?"

Just then, a huge colorless man shoves through the double doorway and puffs across the cement yard toward us. He is hatless and almost completely bald. A

few sparse white hairs rise like steam around his ears. Johnson and I step forward. "So?" the man huffs. "What is it?"

I extend my hand. "Sharon Ortiz," I say. "I volunteer at Northside Shelter. I drove one of the residents here tonight." He looks past me at Star. "She apparently doesn't have the sort of identification your facility requires."

A thick blue cord shows in his neck. "No I.D.," he says.

"She has a work I.D. from her part-time job, with her picture," I say. "Unfortunately, she's lost her food stamp card so she has nothing with her birthdate on it."

For minutes, it seems, he stands strangely motionless, his beefy hands planted on his hips, not speaking. At last I cannot bear it. The words come out of me in a rush. I hear myself using her word — *indigent*. I plead that I will sign anything necessary. My voice has become a brittle whine. I hear the words move out of me. I picture them hitting the air, shattering, failing in tiny shards just short of the lieutenant's black oxfords.

"It's rules," he says, and waddles off.

As I drive, she sits beside me, keening wildly. "I'll report him," I say. "This is ridiculous. He won't get away with it." I reach behind her seat for the box of tissues and press it onto her lap. "Here. We'll get you a card. We'll do something. I'll bring you back tomorrow night," I say. "I promise."

I am not certain she hears. I do not repeat it. I think briefly of Roger.

"Well," I laugh as I twirl around and around in our driveway, my arms slung wide, "check me out so you can identify the body. Beige coat—" I unzip it and grasp the seam beside the zipper. I swing it open. "Red-checked lining," I say in my best announcer's voice, and run my right hand up and down the flannel. I pose. "White blouse, gray slacks—"

"For chrissakes, it's not funny!" he says. "Some of those people *are* loony. You don't even know this woman."

"Her name is Star," I say. "I can trust her."

"Why are you doing this? To get stories?"

I stop. "No, of course not," I say. "It just needs doing, that's all." I stand beside the car and zip my coat.

The night has come quickly in only the few minutes we have stood outside. Sunset has been a stupendous flash of mauve and burgundy and now there is no trace of daylight left. Roger's face is turned toward our house. He has a strong, sturdy profile and I am struck again by how darkly handsome he is. He wears jeans and his favorite shirt, a royal blue jersey with a stunning graphic of a coyote howling beneath a crescent moon. He has ordered the shirt from home, from Colorado.

"My husband is one quarter Navajo and many years ago, lived for a time on a reservation," I tell Star.

I am not sure why I have said this. My face is hot. My head is congested. I am painfully aware of guilt, anger, pity — all in there banging and crashing around. The soft glow illuminating the dashboard washes me like a spotlight. I fight the urge to reach forward to twist the knob to see if I can dim it. Not knowing what else to do, I turn to her. "I feel like a real mess," I say.

"Lord, me too," she says and blows her nose powerfully.

She quietens. We watch the road. It bends neither left nor right.

"Know what?" she says after a minute. "I ain't even real sure I love J.B. He's a kid. He only be nineteen."

"Well, I wish we could have got in to see him."

We are almost half way back to the city. This is the long stretch where the lindens grow thickly, right up to the shoulder of the road. Tonight, their bare branches are ramparts, walling us in. "It's cause I promised him," she says. "I don't like to break no promise."

"No," I say.

Next to me, she adjusted herself and again blows her nose, this time more lightly. "This a nice car, Sharon."

"Thanks, I like it a lot."

"The voice what gets me. I never been in one with a voice."

"His name is Dolittle," I say. "Because that's what he does: very little."

She chuckles. "Jus' like most mens."

"Want some coffee?" I say, feeling suddenly lightened by the shift in her mood, wanting to give her something. "Or maybe some chocolate or tea?"

"Hot chocolate sound good, huh?" she says.

Markle's parking lot is almost full. I maneuver Dolittle into a spot between a waist-high cement block wall that divides the eatery from a Shell station and an orange Volkswagen bus that has been backed in at an awkward angle.

On the bus, *Nasty Habits* is painted in a bold uneven script beneath the driver's window. I smile and tap it with a fingernail as I stand back to let Star out on my side. "What it say?" she asks. "The writing too squiggledy."

"Nasty Habits," I say, and she snickers.

An excruciatingly thin young waitress in a pumpkin-colored mini skirt points at an unsteady rack crammed with fat jackets and long coats. Bright scarves stream from sleeves and thick gloves sprout from side pockets. "Smoking or non-smoking?" the waitress says.

"It don't matter," Star says. She wedges her parka and a thick gray sweater between a trench coat and an unstylish Susie Wong suede coat with a flat mink collar.

"I don't smoke," I say. "Do you?"

"Yeah, but it don't matter. I don't need to smoke."

"Smoking," I say to the waitress.

As we weave down a narrow aisle to a tiny booth near the back, Star rum-

mages in her blue jeans pocket and pulls out a slightly crumpled, bright green sample pack of Ritz menthols.

At the table, we do a little shuffle as she seats herself, realizes I cannot get past her into the booth, stands, starts to move behind the table herself, then changes her mind once more. Finally she squeezes past both the waitress and me to wait in the aisle until I can scoot across the vinyl bench into place. As she sits beside, she straightens the hem of the sleeveless yellow sweater she is wearing and then fixes her wet eyes on the waitress. "Got a match?"

The girl shakes her head no and plucks two plastic-cased menus from a cache between the sugar shaker and the Markle's barbecue sauce. "Back in a sec for your order. Coffee?"

"Two hot chocolates," I say. I slide a menu at Star. "My treat," I say as casually as possible.

She has twisted around on the bench and is regarding the woman and man in the booth behind us. "Got a match?" Simultaneously, they reach for a disposable butane lighter standing on end in the center of their table. They laugh and the woman passes it back.

The cigarette is a bit misshapen and Star straightens it, redistributing the tobacco with thumb and forefinger. She taps the filter against the inside of her palm and puts it between her lips. She lights the end and hurriedly returns the lighter. Then she cups the cigarette with both hands and draws deeply on it two or three times, holding the smoke longer and longer.

Her entire attention is focussed on the cigarette. I watch her, fascinated. The waitress brings the chocolates. I have never seen anyone so completely absorbed in smoking a perfectly ordinary cigarette. There is the air of ritual about it. The smoke is quickly diffused and the smell becomes a part of the general deep odor of pork barbecue, wood smoke, coffee, bodies packed closely together. I am struck that I have been with her for over two hours and yet never have suspected her craving. I cannot ask her why she has not smoked before now because I realize she probably does not have an answer I want to hear.

She sits beside me, cross-legged, fingering the unopened menu. "How about a barbecue sandwich platter?" I say.

"Tha's what I was thinking," she says, so I give our orders to the waitress.

There is a long wait for our food and a silence begins to build itself into a solid between us. It packs itself thickly against the contours of our bodies. I remember the warmth we shared on the way to the prison. I want to push her aside and run. Instead, I reach for my chocolate. I am left-handed and my arm brushes against hers. I hold the steaming cup poised half-way to my mouth. My eyes rake the room, feigning great interest in the other strangers around me. I have given her all I can. She must know that I am uncomfortable. Why doesn't she speak. What would I say if I open my mouth right now? *Do you know you are the first homeless person I have ever been alone with? The first black person I have ever been alone with?* I concentrate on not speaking.

I take a sip of the drink and put the cup down. Our meals have arrived. I look at my plate and my stomach grows queasy. A heap of shredded pork bleeds onto a thick white hamburger roll and onto my plate. It bleeds into the pot liquor from the chopped turnip greens and into the grayish, so-called dirty rice. I remember the job I have volunteered for at the shelter, the job I knew was safest. I have worked in the kitchen and the serving line there once a week for three weeks now. Because of an economic necessity generated by the number of women, most of the foods are strange stews or peculiar casseroles. I wish desperately that I had stopped somewhere different tonight. I am embarrassed at this bastardized soul food that runs in red and green pools into her rice. I wish desperately that I had at least chosen more wisely from the menu. I long suddenly to feed her a meal as sterile as that they serve on airlines. A meal where each food is a separate entity. Each isolated on its tiny, compartmentalized tray. Each harmless and oh-so-clean looking.

But she eats and smiles at me. Her eyes sparkle with a kind of excitement. "Got any kids, Sharon?"

I pick up my fork. "No," I say, and feel immense relief that I can still speak. "I can't have children."

"I got two," she says. "They with Ozone. Even the one ain't his. He still be down there killing chickens, I reckon," She puts a forkful of dripping greens into her mouth. "He a good daddy," she says and reaches for a paper napkin. "He a better daddy than my mother was mother. Or matter of fact, me."

As if she has given me a sign, I feel strangely emboldened. I ask her a personal question for the first time. "How did you meet J.B.?"

She laughs and jabs at her pork. "On the street," she says. "My bus ticket cost fifty-two dollar and the cheapest room I find the first night was twenty-eight. That means the next night on the street." She twirls strands of pork around the tines of her fork. "J.B. he young and good looking, got a mattress and give me three dollar. We been tight since then. Start me a whole new career. Til he go to jail. You not shock, are you?" she says, at last popping the barbecue into her mouth.

I shake my head no. "No," I say, realizing that I mean it, that it is what I have been expecting, that it is what I have been wanting, that I would have been disappointed if it were not so. And suspecting that she knows all this. Which leaves me wondering how much I know.

"You work?" she asks me.

"I teach history in high school," I say, "and I write stories."

"You gonna put me in a story?"

"If I write a chicken story," I say, and I smile, "you will know I have the idea from you."

"Hey, be careful," he says. "I can't read it to you if you get it wet." He pulls the letter into the air with his left hand and continues to read. "And your daddy

promises we'll try to get there this year, but you two of all people know how it is here. He sends his love to you both."

Roger grabs my beer and takes a big swallow. "I'll just be he sends his love to us both." He mimics my mother, "'And you know how it is here.' Boy, do we." I hand him the sudsy washcloth and he automatically begins washing my back. "It's okay for the boss to hire an Indian and make mega bucks off him, but it's something else entirely if the Indian wants to marry his daughter."

"Let me tell you some more about Star," I say.

"Wait, wait, before you begin. You said something in the driveway that's been sticking in my head since you left."

He cups his hand and fills it with water. As we talk, he rinses the soap from my back, from my arms, filling and refilling his hand. "You said, 'Her name is Star and I can trust her.' Well, what I want to know is, I want to know *why* you thought you could trust her."

"But I could," I say. I grab the porcelain handle built into the soap dish and pull myself up, out of the water. "See, I'm all in one piece."

"C'mon, Share, why could you trust her?"

I step onto the bath mat and towel off. "Because she trusts me," I say.

I pick up my slacks, blouse and undies from one pile on the floor, his jeans, briefs, and coyote shirt from another. I finger the shirt. The first story I ever wrote was based on a legend Roger told me. The hero was a coyote — Old Man — who had in him at all times both good and evil. I pad into the bedroom and drop the clothing into the straw hamper beside my dressing table.

On the bed, the sheets are crisp. I line dry them even in the winter if it is at all possible. Roger and I love the way they crackle against us when they are fresh, like tonight. He crawls in beside me and turns off the reading lamp hooked over the headboard. He puts his arm around me and gently draws himself closer. I lie quietly in the dark and feel the reassurance of his breath just above my breast. Soon in his wonderful way, he joins me to him, and I feel the oneness that holds us.

Now, later, we lie together and he strokes a hollow near my waist. Minutes pass. I am rested, but sleep still will not come. "Honey," I say finally, "sorry," and I click on the light and reach for the phone.

"What's wrong?" he says. "Who're you going to call at this time of night?"

"Star," I say. "I promised her something and I'm not certain she heard."

—Dawnelle Loiselle



untitled

Rachel Sengers

Untitled

I was undressing in the dark
when he came in
on his hands and knees
laughing

I backed away
he crawled closer
filling the safe space
making me fear up inside
already cold and wet from my swimsuit

his laugh
too loud
obese and naked

he laughed that laugh
when he would tickle us
until our giggles turned
to shrieks

he laughed that laugh this summer
when he talked to the leathery lizard
woman with shrunken pointed
breasts and hips
that she thrust at him
and his laugh leapt
and grotesquely fondled her

he makes jokes
about fucking midday
on store-window couches

—*Laura Bellows*

And it could happen . . .

Yo man, like here I am and shit . . . all the way . . . Across the Great Divide Un-great. The Massive Blue Un-massive . . . Sent airmail . . . for this! Right now. The Tube. Where it Begins and all Ends . . . Everything . . . London. The Big City. The Queen her Majesty golden Travesty and all the British Hordes packed fast, snug, smug, packaged to go . . . Everyone . . . even the bums, the beggars, the King Rogues of 1000 years . . . "the lot" . . . in this ! . . . And me . . . sitting here, staring into Vacant and Void dead orbs-like . . . Mr. and Mrs., Lad and Chap, Prit and Prat, Bloke and Guv' . . .

All the faces the same from my neat Underground vantage point seat, where I sit, side by side with the rest . . . rolling, humming, "minding every gap!" and They gazing . . . cold . . . into their *Sun* and *Star Mirror* of *The News of the World* not themselves . . . the Tabloid Hordes . . . And that girly birdy over there . . . across and to the right and six down: prim . . . but not . . . crystal-like . . . 'do pressed, curled, hard . . . she neon color bright . . . she a West End painted light . . . a London fashion-whip fright . . . with heels, with nylons covering white, with dark-night short-skirt . . . not shining way in . . .

Four stops still . . . or five . . . till I flash my travel thing to Thing behind bars, cubed in his/her cubicle, checking, somehow, someway . . . then I can walk, can do the Throng Walk . . . Still humming through, still clanging, open-close, in-out, more Hordes . . . or people . . . more newspapers . . . more printed eyes not looking . . .

So listen man, anyway, like I say . . . This is it! London Town . . . the Glory Ride Underground to the sky or somewhere. The pocket-size, one-bite, snapshot portrait of Civilization Culture Grandiose . . . via Ocean A: The train! Their train. Its train . . . Nothing more . . . Cruising. Subterranean. Always nocturnal. Eternally . . .

The British: they are born; they ride; they die . . . says T.S. E. . . .

How long have I been here, here in Once-Empire . . . you ask . . . from America, the healthy . . .

There with that you've got me . . . or They've got me . . . Man! The Anonymous English Power has got me . . . cause you see, I can't say . . . How long? Dude, here there's no measure . . . Only Their Measure . . . Here, there's no time but The Time. The Time taken by the Stops . . . like the difference between the tube stops, stop to stop, like Arsenal to Finsbury Park, like Charring Cross to Heathrow Station . . . Ten stops is Ten-Stops-Time . . . like that . . . Maybe I've been here 2000-Stop-Time . . . At least 2000- Stop-Time . . . More it seems. Can't be sure . . . It's got me though . . . I can't really say . . . Open-close, in-out . . . Three stops to go now . . . I think . . . till my stop, my sta-

tion . . . I'll flash thing, Throng Walk, wait, double-decked bus, red, stand, crowded, papers . . . The Tube Clock ticks . . . And ticks . . . The train rolls . . .

Middle-aged man says "cheers" and sits to my immediate left . . . What? . . . I don't know . . . I move my jacket (so he could sit) and the man says "Cheers" . . . Cheers? . . . Just Nothing-ness . . . They like to cheer; cause they must cheer; cause they've always cheered . . . Gimme-gimme Deferential Mass. Gimme-gimme Homogenized Mob . . . They crack skulls . . . They cheer for team and Team . . . in groups . . . So I've read, of this London, while in this London . . . The News . . . Fleet Men . . . Every finger smeared words dirty . . . Murdock oh Murdock with Master Plan! . . . Cheers! . . . at the pub East End mates . . . Bottoms up! . . .

So what's happenig is that I'm writting you this letter see, and I'm telling you about London see, and I'm inside the Tube we call the Subway they call the underground-pedestrian-underpass something or other, like they drive on wrong side of the road and near kill me every time, like they call trash "rubbish" (thrown in a "dust bin"), like they spell color "colour", like their pizza just Isn't . . . That sort-a shit. Right? Shoo! dude . . . This place . . . where We aren't either, where eyes don't See . . . where, like, they say "Sorry" sort-a like we say Thank you-Come again-Have a nice day (holding smile) like some wonder panacea, some voiced cure-all wonder: a slow-moving Thing-Throng of street and tube halls that coughs "Saw-reh", that coughs "saw-reh theh" like The Pacifier, like Pithy Tonic Hiss, just cool, frigid . . . where "acually quite good really" is THE phrase, the rate of exchange, the currency, the communication . . . like . . .

"How was this?", "How was that?", the play, the concert . . . Asks Culture Prince and Princess, practicing Sloanes . . . Sloane Rangers . . .

"Oh, acually quite good really" in crunchy cucumber TV Public School way, all icy smooth delivery, in supremo condescion to no one, stressing the "quite" so rightly, playing the Oxford Man, the Cambridge Every-man, speaking from center of their world gone . . . "actually" and "quite" surprised such and such could be Yes, "actually quite good really" . . .

And they turn on *Spitting Image*, everlasting Wit bloody-bloody . . . And they turn on *Coronation Street*, everlasting Working Class Goodness blimey-blimey . . . And they get turned on by Monday morn' tabloids, tube ride taugt scandal . . . Just off the presses the Sensation Hordes come and go . . . Page 3 FLESH Doing 'em! . . . And they say, they scoff, they spit: The States can't be real: "The States — truly you jest," they say . . .

And see, I'm American Jim, Joe yankee blue doodle-do, Charlie lost in gray brick and mortar jungle, Charlie to far from surf and sun . . . Standing out . . . Proud . . . Straight from Rough Reagan Country, direct from Killer Rambo Land . . . True West born! . . . All lean and lame bobby-boys beware! cause . . .

But now, just now . . . they've got me . . . held captive almost . . . Right now . . . in this tube! Like stuck in eternal submission. Nocturnally. Like Slave to the stability of the Stop-Time Clockwatch. Mazy in the labyrinthian tangle of tube routes . . . Picadilly, Victoria, District, Circle . . . Green, Red, Black Lines . . . Rolling on without wheels. Endlessly . . . Run by some House of Lords British Demigod Phantom who says Keep the trains moving! The constancy of the Underground, steady . . . The Engineer Big Bro Ghost says Go . . . clang clang, hum hum . . . Go! . . .

Yeah, and that's just it . . . That's just it cause as of this very "moment" . . . this very "UN"-moment I should say . . . dude . . . we ain't moving anymore . . . and we ain't any-anywhere! I mean we have come to complete stop . . . in Nowhere . . . in Nothing . . . in Darkness! . . . This must be . . . It can only be . . . Big Bro Ghost, the House of Lord Phantom Engineer and friend Murdoch with Master Plan . . . conspiring . . . delivering The Treatment . . . instituting their Power . . . making us swallow Prole Suppressing Serum Number Nine . . . in an Orwellian Nightmarian Plot . . . like gin shot! . . . We have stopped. The train has stopped! Destroying Reality, our only Reality . . . Destroying Reality by annihilating Time, Time itself, holy Stop-Time . . . We are stopped in Nowhere! between tube stop stations . . . true, established, official, traditional, historical tube stops . . . God . . . To be exact, between Manor House and Turnpike Lane Picadilly Line Northbound . . . Somewhere in between! . . . like in a state of dark limbo . . . like in Nothing . . . like caught between the Ticks of Stop-Time Order and Truth and Symmetry and Wholeness, celled in by wall and wall, under tons of black British dirt . . . in a virtual black hole not in Space . . . No longer existing in Time! . . . God . . . JEEZ! . . .

Dude, I'm telling you straight. I'm telling you the shit going down London Big City Style, within the nasty nether world of Civilization Culture. The Happening beneath the chaste Norman monoliths. The Goings On below sacred St. Paul Cathedral crypt. The Scene 'neath the ecclesiastical edifices of Father Wren . . .

And I'm the innocent victim of it all . . . like the non-jew inside the holocaust camp . . . surrounded by Vacancy and Void, the faces . . . long used to The Treatment, no doubt . . . already weakened, taken alive . . . They make nothing of it! They wait . . . they sit . . . reading . . . as patient as the living dead. As patient as the living dead for Time to start again . . . as if . . . as if . . . I am trapped among vampires not yet awakened to their cause . . .

Wait . . . W-A-I-T . . . No . . . Yes! . . . SHIT! . . . Oh god no that must be it . . . It must . . . Holy Hell! Like I just got this febrile flash of like total insight . . . alerting me! It must be . . . THIS IS THEIR "TIME" . . . Their UN-Time! Between the stops . . . The hoards . . . When they revive . . . The stopping is connected, is all part of the Master Plan . . . The Great Plot! . . . Unreal . . . like psuedo-real dude! . . . The hordes ARE the Living Dead! for

sure . . . Made vampires . . . blood suckers! by that Phantom Engineer who controls the trains . . . The Underground! The web of London life . . . the web which entraps the foreigners, the aliens . . . entraps me!! . . . Man . . . the winding web of London life spun by Big Bro Ghost Spider who bites the English masses with its death fangs . . . drugging them . . . serious! . . . into servitude, into complicity . . . to fight for Queen and Country . . . for the Forgotten Empire whining! . . . It must be . . .

And I, sitting here, in my vantage point seat . . . am keen to it all! But nervous . . . and getting more nervous . . . But I ain't dumb. Nor Sir. I've read B. Stoker the Instructor: I know . . . I know they must make me theirs . . . Thirsting vampires! Vile wretches! They feed on the rich American brain bank . . . For sure. On the body of thriving economic prosperity and world strength . . . Koppel told us didn't he dude! . . . I've "sussed" them out . . . I'm their survival, their life blood . . . Without me . . . Man! without dudes like you and me, good wholesome yank cats . . . they'd wither and waste in complete atrophy, like black death dissolution and turmoil . . . George Will says so! . . . They'd be scappin' the bones of the Duke of Whales and Gang just to keep those highfalutin museum sights of theirs open . . . and they'd close . . . And the closing would be their final death blow . . . would be the rusted, unsceptered sword through Regency England's royal, (not) guilt-laced robe . . . through the guts Dude! . . . The End like Morrison says . . . the end of The National, The Palace, Lloyds, Westminster, Harrods . . . the end of the Hippodrome and Mud Club and Hard Rock Cafe (the burger bastion!)

Being nervous , like I said, and nervous ain't cool . . . I began fumbling with my jacket resting on my lap . . . fumbling and fiddling like a dern nerd see . . . and Fate wasn't cool. Fate left me hangin'! (Where oh where was my Uncle Sam Fate?) because fumbling and fooling with my varsity jacket, out from its side pocket home jumps . . . leaps . . . bounds! . . . my PASSPORT . . . my blue book of Self Identity and Salvation-in-a-Strange Land . . . It jumps, like on its own will right . . . like things were getting very spooky-weird down here . . . And this blue book Self Revealer of mine lands . . . just makes this smooth glide-landing like it was at the U.S. Embassy A-o.k.!! . . . right plop on the floor, with a pert smack . . . face up! . . . with a rude, imposing smack! in plain view of all creatures, assalting all zombie monsters who sometimes call dinner "tea", and who slurp down totally piss-warm bru-jahs called "pints", and who "snooker" each other real chivalry-like with darts . . . And so there my glorious passport lies, fixed . . . exposed . . . gleaming hard on Their awful glare, like a positive and negative clashing in mid-air . . . screaming The Force of U.S.A. . . . AND! . . . ALSO! . . . at this very same UN-Time, me still nervous, still fumbling . . . an American quarter, a genuine American quarter! . . . the one I carry with me always (just in case dude) . . . a good 25 cent'er through and through (not pence!) leap-frogs from the same (it seems) conspiring-against-me-pocket and rolls . . . and rolls . . . and rolls . . . down

the aisle, the long aisle . . . slowly, like struttin' like in full gait . . . down the aisle . . . with the shimmering image of Pres' Washington . . . Revolutionary War George purporting Britian's downfall . . . rolling on! . . . the intrepid silver . . . parading . . . the dauntless image reflecting . . . proud . . . proclaiming my terrible yank foreignness to all the U.K.!! . . . inside the stopped tube THEIR TIME . . .

I was found out . . . undone! . . . Doomed . . . The passport, the coin . . . Me! . . . Succulent me . . . on a tube seat golden meat platter for THEM . . . to devour . . .

At once! as if upon a portentous Big Ben chime, as if upon the sounding of some abbey alarm clock . . . the British hordes spring to life, all for one and one for all! All eyes arise from their sleep and slumber in the back of heads and beam mean fire balls on their prey . . . their unexpected treat . . . their pleasant suprise: Me! . . . What would become of me now, mused I, the now non-existing, non-entity lost on the between-the-tick-Nowhere of Stop-Time, cruel Stop-Time . . . me at the mercy of a Hungry Homogenized Mass . . .

All the Before freeze-frames before me like family slides: the big car I see, the big TV and big suburban house I see, the big microwave and the big washer and dryer I see, the big VCR and CD player I see, the surfboard and skateboard and moped and BMX I see, the food prossesor and thirty-eight blow dryers I see . . . my skilled dexterity with the Atari Joy Stick I see . . . and the service I'd done for The Young Republicans for Freedom and the Pilgrim Way and Natural Life at school I see . . . Oh school, college . . . the Brothers! The Pound Crew and Slamming Bunch!! Weekend-Animal-Mania . . . What would become of me now? Dude, between me and you, I'm shitting bricks . . . dropping cold boulders . . . letting go mountain glaciers . . . releasing dyno-rocks! . . . Out from every pore oozes my last fish n' chips lunch like green puss . . . THEY WANT ME . . .

My George-boy quarter stops rolling . . . finally! toppling over with an ominous thud, a resounding thud . . . which echoes like a gong . . . yes which echoes like a chinese gong KUH-BOOM! . . . And a small boy . . . a curious British boy . . . still not quite vampire . . . makes to pick it up, to play with it . . . an innocent boy, like me . . . He bends forward; he stretches little arm; he opens tiny, perspiring palm . . . BUT JUST THEN! Mother . . . flabby Mother . . . alerted to the HORROR by fellow creatures with their eyes peeled . . . reacts . . . in the nick of time (so they thought) . . . and with a large foot she crushes little boys' endangered hand under the sole of her shoe . . . just before his fingers would sizzle! (so it all seemed dude!) sizzle on the like burning sulfur of the coins surface . . . Just before his innocent fingers could touch the poison! . . . And in the Mother doing so, just in the nick of time like she did, the train is engulfed with a baritone chorus of heavy sighs . . . deep exultations of relief: THE BOY IS SAVED! (they believed) . . .

Yo, like this is the scene . . . the low-down . . . No way man I couldn't make

this up! It's happening! . . . They really think it's poison . . . acid and brimstone . . . The quarter! some kind of secret weapon bull radiating plutonium or some shit . . . Totally . . . Totally UN-rad! . . . And I'm hip to all this, keen . . . Have to keep sane though . . . Have to stay sane . . . Sanity be my guide . . . I must recite The Pledge. Oh! The Pledge of Allegiance of Beauty and the Sublime . . . Yes The Pledge all the way: "I pledge allegiance to the flag . . . liberty and justice . . . one nation . . . indivisible . . ." all that, silently, to myself, in my mind, repeating over . . . and over . . . Yes yes sanity sanity, self-control . . . The Pledge my Holy Chant . . . my Freedom Song . . . my Salvation! . . . "I pledge allegiance . . ."

So what happens right, just after Mother crushes the kids fingers is . . . like . . . all eyes . . . all red glowing lights . . . mercury flashers . . . beam back on me . . . like the power of The National Unconscious working for One Cause, for One Mind . . . One Mind steered by Big Bro Ghost . . . The Spider! . . . call IT what you want dude-skin . . . This IT that controls the Underground, the tangled web of London life . . . which GETS the foreigners, the aliens . . . along with Maf-Murdock, this Murdock with his Master Plan! . . . the Workings of the Thing Unknown . . . And so now, with every demon orb focussing on me (except maybe those of the little boy, sniffing over squashed fingers) . . . Now. Right now . . . it really begins . . .

This Britainer geek across from me . . . Britainer geek turned vampire like the rest . . . dressed smart, college boy type, *Guardian* folded on his lap . . . a "liberal", his *Guardian* opened to World Affairs section . . . picks up passport from off the floor; looks it over real polite-like, real gay-like dude . . . Then sizes me up, with a "mmm prized catch in OUR cage and he's ALL OURS OH MY" sort of look (I could have popped him clean; if you were here we'd . . .). He hands me my blue book Revealer, in his best nonchalance . . . all lava eyes fixed . . . the tension . . . the tension pounding . . . my pulse racing . . . Dude, I'm telling it to you straight! . . .

"Tis yours is it? Ehr you go chum, little bit of British 'ospitality you might say," he says, in that real fine sardonic way you know . . . And with a smile. Holy! a terrible smile . . . a total sham-king-of-sham . . . Man! a smile that cracks, cracks the plaster moulding of his face . . . you could hear it cracking . . . And yeah you caught that double-repeat question mess . . . that, "Tis yours IS IT?" crap . . . I keep chanting The Pledge, my Allegiance . . . my sanity . . .

"Thanks," I reply, being friendly, plain, being myself.

"Are you American are you?" he asks, double-repeat question again! . . . He the Big Initiator of conversation . . . Going out of himself for The Cause . . . The Empire . . . most unlike his nature . . . most unlike the spirit of his country . . . of course . . .

"Yes," I reply, honestly from the heart. "We do exist. We are flesh and bone. We believe in peace."

"I see," he says, looking to his comrade hordes.

"We see," the hordes chime in, in perfect harmony, the unified voice of Oneness . . .

"En what may I be so rude to ask is your business 'ere? if you don't mind me asking," asks snappy head hord, white-faced, pink-lipped.

"Well, I'm a student," I say, being very earnest, truly sincere. "I'm given information and various data and then I am to study it."

"I see."

"We see."

"En what may I be so rude to ask are you studying over 'ere?"

"Well, I'm a double major you see," I say, gaining confidence, feeling good, possibly on my way to a friendship. "I learn about government: Why Democracy must prevail; and I learn economy: how a superpower can fail."

Evidently, I have said the right thing . . . or maybe the wrong thing . . . I sense a mood change . . . They're shifting in their seats, rubbing their eyes, wiping their foreheads . . . It seems I won't be so easily taken . . . I'm too good . . . too pure America . . . They want me though yes badly . . . They regroup . . . I hear something like hissing, heavy breathing, a light panting gaining strength . . . My chalk-faced questioner-interragator receives cue . . .

"You are familiar with *Spitting Image* are you yes?"

"Well, uhm, like, I guess so," I say, playing it safe, keeping cool, calm, well-collected.

"Yes of course, surely of course you are indeed," he says, shooting a One Mind glance at his comrades with a new kind of zealous fever. "Tis simply splendid tis. Smashing. Oh tis quite wonderful really tis!" his eyes burning mad now, and intensifying; he transforming, changing, contorting . . . his teeth! his teeth!! . . . in a craze, "Your Gaucho there, that Don Ron so very chipper" . . . and then he loses it dude . . . goes paroxysmal . . . raving he bursts: "THE PRESIDENT'S BRAIN IS MISSING!!!" (which I take to be some gag, some dumb gag from the show) . . . "Oh tis specially thrilling that," barely catching his breath, "Oh it chills the spine it does, quickens the heart . . . Oh Oh Oh . . ." And with this, all of Them, now seeming much closer to me than before, erupt in mind-boiling cacophony . . . hysterics . . . pandemonium . . . a whirlwind of demoniac laughter now pressing me, pinning me against the back of the seat, I UN-momentarily, paralyzed . . . like an uncanny force has me, has me under its wicked spell! . . .

But as suddenly as the hysterics, the whirlwind had started, with a quick snap of head fang's fingers it ceases, stops! . . . An awful silence then rules . . . I feel myself slipping . . . my will ebbing . . . a queer euphoria overtaking me both pleasant and odious . . . like the tubes endless tunnel has slanted from its horizontal to a decending vertical; I'm like falling backward and head first down its well-like abysss . . .

The Pledge! I've forgotten The Pledge!! my sweet 'n tender-loving Pledge . . .

my paean . . . I chant and chant again and again this Pledge I had so indifferently voiced throughout grammar school, every morning of my foolish childhood while looking at The Flag . . . the very Flag that couldn't touch ground or it'd BURN! it'd spontaneously flame and combust . . . Yes! so indifferently . . . Now the words have become my very soul . . . struggling! . . .

"Tis funny tis," begins my questioner, breaking the dead quiet. "Quite funny actually," . . . smiling his lusting smile . . . "what happened last night . . . Of course you have heard of course indeed you have."

Heard? Last night? No, I hadn't heard . . . No, at least I don't think so . . . because! Because!! . . . this morning . . . to my ultra-horror! I found my dependable *U.S.A. Today* vending machine smashed all to bits . . . tiny, painful bits! . . . Hooligans . . . the act of the Balded Heads no doubt, the hateful Skin People! . . . And so without it, having to go without today's copy . . . with my color pictures and bold headlines cut off, stripped from me naked, my contact destroyed . . . my culture and homeland just indiscernable scraps of metal and wire and wet, foot-trodden paper sprawled on the pavement . . . I suddenly felt lost . . . stranded . . . empty . . . confused . . . had an acute pang of solitude . . . (I should have known it was a sign!) . . . And plus, even worse . . . without it, I would go the entire day without The News . . . The News of the Day! . . . and I was to apologize for not having read a newspaper all day when he continues . . .

"Yes very amusing your horseman Don Ron would let go so valently his Big Bomb, and with such form . . . and what a bomb it was, oh my . . . and such a clever thing, so spontaneous . . . We 'ear Hollywood has begun filming with that Refrigerator-lad as lead . . . ho those Californians . . . and a book is out as well . . . King I believe . . . Gadhafi invades missionary group of small town Boston Brownies vacationing on the sandy coast of Libya . . ." the vampire rambled. "That Libya evaporated so quickly, so conveniently some do say . . . Twas an event indeed . . ."

Gosh . . . Holy Gosh!! . . . Sacred cow!!! . . . I swallow hard, real hard . . . gasp for air . . . I'm awe-struck with pride . . . The courage of my country! . . . Bless them . . . They must be cracking brews!! . . . This WAS news . . . fat, juicy news . . . And I missed reading about it . . . Damn! . . . It makes me dizzy, giddy, gives me vertigo to the max' . . . Such news . . . My face flushes over . . . They see I'm weakening . . . So dumb-struck am I, so swelled with pride . . . my anti-vampire guard goes down . . . I would be easy now . . . They sensed victory . . . could taste me, my meat . . . Prime-rib . . . U.S. Grade A yank flesh . . . They moved closer still . . .

"En what do you think of all this?" They echo.

At a loss for words . . . my head spinning . . . mercury eyes of Mob-ness scorching me, melting me . . . I think of my education . . . my textbooks . . . What I've studied . . . what I know of World History . . . and so . . .

"Well, it was a very moral decision you see. It was done in the name of

Truth, of what Right and Good and Just and Clean and Odorless and leaving little Foul Aftertaste: Sir it was either us or them . . . And besides," I add, "you know, that man, that Mad Dog was a real nuisance at times; yeah, a real pain, a bug, always having to see his face just before *Tic Tac Dough* starts, kinda spoiling the show, yuh know?"

Dude, I have to say what I honestly believed . . . Man, I can't tell a lie, just can't . . . Not me . . . No way . . . Even with vampires at my throat . . . I can't deface . . . can't blacken the Red, White, and Blue . . . Right? You'd do the same you know you would . . .

This really triggers them though . . . I'm too much for them . . . Through and through I reek of greasy, McDonalds Patriotism. Smell of hot, Sloppy Joe Jingoism. Exude sticky Peanut Butter Puritanism . . . Embody the Rich, Fast Food Essence of Reaganism . . . And that's all; I can't help it . . . And nor can they help themselves from me! . . . can't resist, hold off any longer . . . They see the Majestic White House in my eyes. The Apple Pie in my heart. The Disney-simplicity of my smooth world . . .

They move in, starving . . . strange sucking sounds, premature lip-smacking . . . Within seconds I'd be made THEM!! . . .

But The Pledge, The Pledge, The Pledge . . . my mind remains lucid, my soul still pure . . . I'm keen, still hip . . . Tom Cruise-like . . . still every bit the yank . . . Their poisoned fangs not yet pierced the delicate pink of my skin . . . There's still Hope . . .

I call to Uncle Sam . . . pray for Main-Man Same Fate to intervene. And he Does! Well, sort of . . . in his own cute way . . . I can feel his presence . . . have faith, mighty faith . . . but know that only I can save myself . . . my own will to be free . . . It's up to me dude! . . .

And just then it comes . . . My Sam protector speaks . . . Hell yeah! I have it . . . Fuck'n A Yes! (excuse the language but I'm hyped, like psyched) . . .

The like supernatural power of the quarter, the force of the intrepid coin which proclaimed me as alien in front of Them and began this . . . the way it seemed to radiate that plutonium like bizz . . . Oh yeah!!

More than just a simple idol, a mere symbol . . . It holds real power! both spiritual AND physical . . . like the crucifix warding off the original Dracula!! These plots don't change . . . It works! . . . Dude, believe, I stand in testimony: this is no game show come on, dude: metaphysical-crazy can't be explained like nuclear missiles and war stategems and star battles and Welsh's New Squeeze Jelly in convenient tube . . . only ACCEPTED . . . must be a BELIEVER . . .

I rifle through my pockets, the same that had conspired against me (I then thought) . . . something better than Washington's 25 piece I have . . . I got it! My key chain!! Ohh-yeah! . . . my with-it good luck charm bought last Spring Break in Vegas . . . straight from rock n' roll Viva-Vega-Paradise (a real city that was oh man dude 'member!) . . . So fingering it, folding it, my Viva

chain . . . caressing ME over it . . . the charm seems hot . . . almost too hot to handle . . . on fire like, like that Suzie in class dude-ly . . . THE CHARM IS CHARGED! Ohh-yeah!! Surely it has the same power as the coin, more even . . . In my hand, in my poor and humble hand! I can feel its pulsating electron-tricity going, determined, coming through in the clutch! . . . This, my garlic key chain . . . This, my mega-holy crucifix charmer . . . Supercharged. ohh-yeah!

And not just any key chain in the looks category either, but a double-sided job . . . about three inches square, half-inch thick, made of smooth plastic, like a plate of glass sparkling, like a mirror . . . on one side glints an oh-so titillating dream of the American Flag, like a dream it looks so nature-true, can almost feel, the silk so awesome; and on the other! is the face of The Most High Frank Sinatra, Frank S. The Conquering Lion . . . our strength, such a model for the kids at home . . . a NON-crack user too . . . This, as I say (you tried to steal it from me 'member dude but I forgave yuh) was no ordinary key chain . . . Like we say, "Moves ovuh Jesus and lets Franklin wheel fuh real!" . . . So guy, yo, to summarize: You'll remember that I'm caught between Manor House and Turnpike Lane Station . . . way below the surface Earth, far beneath the A to "Zed"(!) dank city streets . . . in Spaceless, Timeless, Nowhere . . . Big Bro House of Lord Spiderman, despotic dracula ruler of all lesser draculas . . . behind it all . . . Stinging his Tabloid Hoard passengers, making them tube zombies who awaken to their Cause when the Stop-Time Clock doesn't strike . . . aided by the man who controls The News, Master Murdock and Plan . . . all out to take me, make me . . . do me . . . me the U.S. Extra-Strength . . . the life-stuff and vitamin-blood of Empire Gone . . .

I have my Viva Vegas charmer . . . have my Faith, my Humility . . . and have the gospel of B. Stoker guiding . . .

My questioner . . . mouth caked gray with London froth . . . maybe sexually wanting . . . lunges clumsy for first, much needed suck . . . I'm ready though . . . ready to do battle with not just this corpse but all the dern reanimated corpses . . . all those fore and aft now . . . every last . . . I brandish the American Flag side first . . . with stars spangled . . . the striped all glow . . . like with a blow torch and he a scarecrow I taunt him, dare him . . . the weight of all yankeedom upon me . . . And dude! instantly, like *Creature Feature!* he cringes back, cringes back repulsed . . . in total abject repulsion! . . . I flash it again . . . and again . . . the mirror reflecting his own devil rays back to him . . . He drops, drops to his knees, shields his face, doubles over, clutches his stomach . . . beaten . . . made dern foolish! Ohh-yeah!! . . .

And now comes the rest . . . panting . . . craving wild my economically thriving bod' . . . so eager to have me authentic High School Class Ring as booty . . . as spoils! This time I jab one-two-lightning the image of Frank, Killer Frankie, Frank-babe with pleasant and good natured countenance . . . reciting

The Pledge, out loud reciting The Pledge . . . in total Pledge-State-of-Mind . . . concentrating . . . all thoughts . . . believing believing believing . . . the Ab-solutism of Unck Providence Sammy . . . thinking Viva Vegas charm . . . Graceland . . . Mount Rushmore . . . Flinstones Amusement Park Rapid City, South Dakota way . . . believing in America the swell and keen and neat and groovy . . .

Suddenly there's smoke, a great puff a smoke . . . a mist surrounds and UN-momentarily shrouds the key chain . . . Somehow, someway . . . Frank's face is coming alive in my palm! the presence, the spectre becoming the material apparition . . . becoming animated, real! . . . and then, and then . . . and then! there's The Voice, that heavenly, that Divine sound his very own . . . Franky's. Franky begins to sing!! Yes SING right here right now: "S-T-A-R-T S-P-R-E-A-D-I-N' T-H-E N-E-W-S . . ." O dude dude dude dude . . . !

The creatures, the vile Things, the mass of Deference and One Color Sallowness become transfixed by the melody, enraptured by the one-part harmony that can only be the Music, the Vocal Chords of some God . . . singing the spirit of American Heritage *Time/Life* books dig-the-beat-come-on! . . . And it gets louder . . . stronger . . . more fierce . . . and the Vampire Voids spaz . . . spazola . . . spaz in and spaz out . . . tear their insides, tear at their de-flamed orbs . . . ripping, ripping free from the sockets a slime-ish goo gush that spots up and stains my Jams! my good Jams!!

Sinatra's voice roaring now . . . like redemption time . . . in my hands . . . the charm, miniature Franky . . . is the soul-stuff of an entire nation . . . Indivisible . . . Indomitable . . . Irrepressible! . . . Libya felt our top-guns (and ain't that the truth dude-be!) and so now does the House of Lord Big Bro Ghost Engineer . . . Murdock feelin it too . . .

And . . . And! as I hoist the 79¢ Vegas-bought (bought at that same nifty-gift, do-dad emporium where I got Mah that lewd card she scolded me for 'member dude!) hoist the key chain way-high above my head and trod through the prostrated and supine bodies on down the aisle, the long aisle . . . like bearing the Holy Grail . . . bearing the Holy Grail as wretched infidels claw at my Reebok Ultra Ultra's in desperation . . . I hear . . . Ohh-yeaah! . . . I hear the familiar hum of the tube, the train!! heralding the Big Triumph of Uncle Sam . . . Indomitable, Irrepressible Uncle Sam Supercool . . .

So with key chain raised high above my head . . . like a freedom torch . . . like a beacon of Justice and Goodness and Natural Choice . . . with the Voice of Frank-so Righteous surging through me . . . there comes a sudden jolt . . . like a quake tremor, like a shock-wave . . . It's the Tube, the Eternal Tube: It begins to move!! . . . And so at last does Time, the Tick and the Tock of the Time-Stop-Clock . . . the nocturnal constancy of the Underground . . . whoever its driver . . . Hum hum, clang clang Go!

Yo man, no shittin' . . . so its happening . . . in the Big City so lame . . . Across the Great Divide UN-great. The Massive Blue UN-massive . . . All this! The Tube! . . . with passport, with quarter, with Viva Vegas charmer . . . and

writing it all down for you Dude-o . . . for History . . . for that junk Posterity . . . Ohh-yeaaahh slam a beerski on me ohh-yeaaahh . . .

—*Steve Strizver*



untitled

Robert Breth

Oranges

In Paris with a faceless
Poet — “inspired” and “upcoming”
I peel oranges in my chablis,
we discuss the Essential Nature of
Life
amid sideward glances and crumby tabletops
he shrieks
“La vie, c’est un poison!”
(if he, with his madman’s arms,
should strike a waiter —!)
a camera-quack
moves his tripod and family away
and I recall someone
seeking Wisdom in track shoes
finding an old man in a lonely place
with all the answers in his eyes;
But her Tibetan was rotten
maybe she said hello
maybe she asked for the bill —
He just turned somersaults
and fell asleep in the sun.

—Lynn Cherny



untitled

Christopher Marlow

A Seduction of Angels

The first time Marvin Uomort thought he could fly was in Gristedes.

He had completed his more or less routine selections, punching out the price of each item on his pocket calculator and then placing the provolone wheel carefully into the cart, adjacent to, but not touching the baklava or feta, so that he was able, as was his wont and desire, to approach the checkout station with the correct money available in his hand: Three tens, a five, seven ones, two quarters, two dimes, two nickels, and three pennies; forty-two, eighty-three exactly.

There was a new girl working checkout and as he manouevred his cart to the precisely pre-determined position for optimum unloading Marvin triggered two unprecedented and virtually simultaneous reactions: The first of these came technically from the girl.

She smiled at him.

People just didn't smile at Marvin. They adjusted to his presence amongst them, utilising in so doing an infinite variety of subtleties and nuances. At best they ignored him completely. They never, but *never* smiled at him.

The second reaction came from Marvin himself. Conscious of the warmth generated by the smile he looked up in bewilderment, instinctively seeking the source. Locating it he saw immediately that the girl was beautiful. Not attractive, or pretty, or lovely, or charming, but Capital B - e - a - u - t - i - f - u - l Beautiful.

Five adjectives in as many seconds was *completely* unprecedented. Marvin was a graduate of the adjective-and-prefix school of description. In his world a person was pleasant or -un; competent or -in; moral or -im; honest or -dis: He had found this method to be perfectly adequate for categorizing anything and anyone he had ever encountered and it was with a sense of irony if not semantics that he acknowledged its total *inadequacy* to cope with either the smile, by which he was now entirely surrounded or the girl who was programming it.

Admittedly he lacked any criteria against which to measure it but even so it was, thought Marvin, a most extra-ordinary smile.

The girl's eyes never left his for a single moment as she rang up his purchases on the cash-register, and the smile was there the whole time. It was a charming smile by any standards, but what set it apart for Marvin, and indeed, elevated it into a class by itself was the dialogue that accompanied it.

"I'm not *really* a checkout jockey any more than you're really an actuary", he heard, though he would have been hard put to isolate the source of the words. "What *we* are, Marvin, is Tristan and Isolde, Abelard and Heloise, every boy and girl who ever made the history books because they made love. That's *us*,

Marvin, don't you see? But there's a catch, so when wasn't there? A few dragons to slay, a few dollars to make, what's the dif? Parents are funny, they want the best for their daughters. The thing is with my folks they got this hang-up. Any guy wants me, fine; providing he can fly. So, how about it Marvin? You do want me, don't you, and I just know you can do it."

"Okay, fella, what are you, payin' rent on that checkout?"

Marvin realized that his cart was empty, his money in the cash-register, and he was blocking the counter. The smile was gone but in its afterglow he loaded his packages to the carrier and left the store, unable to resist checking the relationship between his feet and the floor.

At the office he was just another desk whom colleagues had long ago ceased inviting to lunch or after-hours drinks at Toni's, and he always kept several days from his vacation for use when informal office parties were being held. On Tuesday a bridal shower was planned for one of the stenographers and Marvin stayed home.

At a little after eleven he went up on the roof to feed his pigeons. He was surprised to find this task being undertaken by a person completely unknown to him.

The stranger was a tall, blonde youth with startling cornflower-blue eyes that seemed to be all iris, dazzling, almost painfully-straight teeth, and perfectly symmetrical features on a fragile-yet-sturdy delicate-pink frame. The term "pretty-boy", a throwback to his youth, with its connotations of fags and their mysterious releases flashed into Marvin's mind, and he paused, latent fear of the unknown overriding common sense.

"Hi", said the youth warmly. "I'm the new third-floor front. I was just admiring these pigeons. They yours?"

Marvin nodded and went forward, any remaining uncertainty instantly dispelled. The boy seemed to possess an encyclopedic knowledge of pigeons, and his discourse on wing-stress, trade winds, and air-currents, related as if from personal experience held Marvin spellbound.

It was only when he had excused himself and disappeared on some private errand that Marvin realized that throughout the virtual monologue he had not been conscious of any movement of the boy's lips.

Standing on the roof's edge Marvin had a completely irrational impulse to span the fifty-some feet gap to the adjoining roof by simply stepping off this one and picking up a brisk tail-wind. For several seconds he knew he was on the brink of so doing, but the moment passed and he returned to his life.

On Friday he went for his annual physical. Doctor Coolham's offices were on the thirtieth floor of the Fremont building but for some reason the express elevator was non-functional. He squeezed into the local and allowed himself to be herded to the rear wall. Although there were maybe a dozen people between them and even then her back was toward him he was acutely aware that the operator was smiling at him, and he somehow knew that the radiant smile was

intended for him alone and no one else. The elevator stopped at every floor and by the tenth Marvin was completely relaxed "Why, I could *fly* faster than this", he thought dreamily, only dimly conscious that he had at last voiced, albeit to himself, his growing obsession.

Doctor Coolham was as thorough as ever, a quality for which Marvin had initially selected him; he amassed X-ray plates, blood and issue samples, fragments of bone, and hair, as if he intended to jump on the cloning bandwagon.

"Couple of things I'd like to have Baltimore look over", he said evenly, filling a reassuring pipe. "Probably nothing in it but we're introducing it as part of the routine."

"Fine", said Marvin automatically. "When do you expect a report?"

The doctor turned his head and consulted a wall-calendar behind him.

"Look in on the eighteenth", he said with a consulting-room smile. "Miss Challis will fix an appointment for you."

Leaving the doctor's suite and the smile of Miss Challis, Marvin had to work hard to repress the almost overpowering urge to fling open the window and glide gracefully down all thirty storeys. Calming himself he resolved to drink only Perrier water in the future; two flights down and he reconsidered: L.S.D. in the water supply? Say it aloud and you'll wind up in the laughing-academy, he thought, and the thought came packaged in cold sweat. Then: But what about those nuts who jumped off buildings thinking they could fly whilst under the influence of hallucinatory drugs?

He reached the street a mass of contradictions. Two blocks away he found a drug-store. On his way to the pharmacy counter he paused and turned his head towards the soda-fountain. Seated on adjacent stools were the girl from Gristedes and the pigeon expert.

"Hello, you two know each other?", he said, instantly feeling foolish, for seen together, it was clearly apparent that the two were all but identical twins. They nodded without speaking, finished the soda they were sharing, and climbed down off their stools.

"We have to go now, we're late for an appointment", said the man pleasantly.

Marvin watched them leave with no sense of loss and when the counter-man came he ordered a double chocolate-malted with two straws.

On Monday, passing the typing-pool he felt strangely elated. He paused for a moment and then turned and walked through the rows of girls. In the middle of the second row was the girl from the checkout. He floated over and stood at her elbow.

"Hi", she said through the smile. "I hope you don't mind. I figured if I stayed at Gristedes I'd only get to see you once a week; this way you can put in a requisition for me any time you feel like it. Cute, huh?"

Marvin nodded happily, only mildly disturbed by the fact that the other girls

in the pool seemed completely oblivious to his presence.

From that moment on people — and not just *people* people, but *beautiful* people began smiling at Marvin like there was no tomorrow, and in direct proportion to the smiling his flying began to improve.

Of course it wasn't really *flying*, but it was certainly the next best thing. He would run along the sidewalk, attain maximum speed, leap into the air gracefully, extending his arms, and once clear of the ground, slow down and propel himself forward with swimming motions of his arms. The performance was not unlike that of an athlete competing in the long-jump except that instead of leaving the ground and climbing shallowly to a zenith at the mid-point of the jump and then descending to earth at the same shallow angle, Marvin, once clear of the ground travelled parallel to it for the duration of his flight. From three or four feet he soon built up, with the help and encouragement of Isolde, as he now thought of her, to thirty yards.

On the morning of the eighteenth he set out with Isolde for Doctor Coolham's office. It was a particularly lovely late summer morning with just the slightest chill in the air: a first run-through for fall. He crossed Madison at fifty-first, feeling exceptionally lighter than air. Halfway across he noticed that Isolde was not in her usual place at his side. He turned to look for her and spotted her on the sidewalk. She had the smile going and there was now a little something extra in it, as if it contained inside knowledge of the breakthrough that all at once he knew was imminent.

He flapped his arms in pure, soaring delight. "Jesus, I can do it. I can really *fly*", he said blissfully, oblivious of the beer-truck running a red light behind him.

"I can really *fly*", he shouted at the top of his voice. And then, of course, he really could.

—Leon Nock

A House Rented

When we prepare to leave here
it is as if we have already gone.
The wind swings easy through
the porch screen door, siphoning
this afternoon hour fragile as
the glass souvenirs we wrap
in newspaper. I lean heavy
on elbows out the window,
watch for the woodpecker whose
hollow knock keeps his own time.
We can say things simple like
*cup, or last carton, or the apples
are behind the front seat.* And
this is enough. The light breaks
hard; soon the east side of
the house will be dull with waiting.
I sweep sawdust and scraps of paper,
the soot from the oil stove that
lines everything like ink. We fasten
the front door lock and walk
the key down to the man we find
most of the time wiping his boat
in the garage. We are ready.
We see Orion with his belt
slung low in the sky and the road
pulls under the car black like ice.

—*Laura Dickinson*

Contributors

Jacquelyn Vanasse is a senior advertising design major planning on working in an advertising agency.

Nancy O'Donnell is Irish.

Lynn Cherny is a sophomore with chronic writer's block.

Paul Elliott just started writing and feels that he has found a home.

Melanie Coates is a freshman journalism major and aspiring writer.

Pamala S. Deane is a journalism major living in Greenbelt, Maryland.

Narvia Summers is a sophomore in pre-design with the intent to major in advertising.

Beth Darrow doesn't really want to do her honor's thesis anymore.

Valerie Russell is a poet surviving somehow, somewhere, here and there.

Catherine Poulin just keeps writing better poems.

Renee R. Curry is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Maryland.

Dawnelle Loiselle has whirled out of a blur and landed in College Park.

Rachel Sengers doubles her appearances in Calvert with this effort.

Laura Bellows may be in Scandanavia this time next year.

Steve Strizver . . . English Major . . . Senior!! . . .

Christopher Marlow is an advertising major.

Robert Breth submitted this picture last year.

Leon Nock is an exchange student from England who is not at all sure about American banks.

Laura Dickinson is a graduate student in English who thinks the editor-in-chief is tired of seeing her work.

